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**Profoundly Disturbing: The Aesthetics of Violence and the Everyday in  
European Art Cinema**

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## **Abstract**

Since the late 1990s, critics and scholars have sought to account for a new trend in European art cinema typified by graphic violence, explicit sex and self-reflexive modes of address aimed at involving spectators in uncomfortable and challenging ways. This tendency towards provocation has attracted a variety of labels, including the “new European cinema” (Falcon 1999), “new French extremity” (Quandt 2004), “*cinéma du corps*” (Palmer 2006), “cinema of sensation” (Beugnet 2007), “new extremism” (Horeck and Kendall 2011) and “unwatchable” (Grønstad 2007, 2012), and has been subject to formalist, phenomenological, ethical and audience-based approaches. This thesis intersects with these studies, recasting critical focus to examine a crucial and overlooked aspect: the everyday.

Theorisation of the everyday in philosophy, cultural studies, and film studies, tends to figure conceptions of the quotidian on a spectrum. On the one hand the everyday is seen as negative (a mundane and repetitive sphere of alienation from which we should long to escape), while on the other it is conceived positively (as the container of intrinsic human truths if only we attend to its microstructures). Between these two poles, however, is what Michael Sheringham calls the quotidian’s “fruitful indeterminacy” (*Everyday Life* 30)—the everyday is both self-evident and elusive. Engaging with these conceptions, and treating the everyday in relation to, rather than separate from, moments of extremity, this thesis articulates disturbing affect as the product of an identifiable aesthetic mechanism in a group of films that divorces violent representation from the meaning with which to reconcile it. It argues that like the understanding of the quotidian as indeterminate, depictions of horrific violence intruding on the everyday point towards the profound. These paroxysmal moments suggest the potential to reveal something about human nature, and yet the consequence, message or meaning of this violence remains undefined. This thesis considers these films as existing on a continuum of disturbing cinema, which employs aesthetic strategies in the representation of the everyday to preclude closure. These include involving viewers in hermeneutic problems that cannot be adequately solved, paring back style to withhold cues that would typically prepare viewers for moments of violence or guide their response, orienting viewers’ expectations only to radically usurp them, and structurally embodying the temporal quality of the everyday’s combination of seemingly interminable monotony and moments of disruption.



In order to examine the style, structure and temporality of films including *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Pasolini 1975), *The Seventh Continent* (Haneke 1989), *Fat Girl* (Breillat 2001) and *Michael* (Schleinzer 2011), the project employs close analysis in the tradition of scholars such as Victor Perkins, George M. Wilson, and George Toles. These analyses reveal an enduring dynamic between the extreme and the everyday that is fundamental to an understanding of how the films examined generate what is here termed disturbing affect. This thesis offers an alternate approach to a compelling tendency in recent European art cinema and investigates the affective potential of films that disturb viewers, stir controversy and provoke censors. Further, it seeks to illuminate the key aesthetic qualities that continue to inform a growing body of disturbing European art cinema.

**Declaration by author**

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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**Publications during candidature**

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For mum 1957-2013.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction to the Profoundly Disturbing

Things flash up—little worlds, bad impulses, events alive with some kind of charge. Sudden eruptions are fascinating beyond all reason, as if they're divining rods articulating something. But what? (Stewart *Ordinary Affects* 68)

#### Introduction

There is a startling moment in Michael Haneke's *Hidden/ Caché* (2005) when softly spoken Algerian character, Majid, unexpectedly slits his own throat. Blood bursts at once in a fine mist and a thick torrent, staining the wall of his drab tenement in a great red stripe as his body collapses to the floor, his head unceremoniously hitting a chair on his way down. Our protagonist Georges looks on, almost frozen in horror at the blood spreading across the floor at a barely perceptible measure towards him. The only sounds we hear are diegetic; Majid labouredly gurgles on the floor like a congested snorer, Georges gasps, paces, coughs. Significantly, there is nothing in Majid's performance prior to this act, nor in the film's style, to indicate that this will happen. The moment occurs in a static long take, its shock accumulating weight through the time it is held on screen. This sudden eruption of violence into the everyday seems to signal something profound; it occurs at the moment when we expect the film's central enigma might be resolved and its narrative to most cohere. Majid has invited Georges inside, we assume to deliver a message—instead we see a gruesome spectacle and yet its formal treatment is markedly unspectacular. Further, Majid's motivation, and the purpose of this violence remains undefined. Instead of the clarity we anticipate, this suicide continues and deepens the existing openness of meaning that characterises the film as a whole.

In an article for *Wide Screen* in 2009, Kartik Nair describes this moment as “an act of violence so unbelievable we hit rewind”:

Suddenly, “in a flash of lightning” as Benjamin says, “the Then and Now come together into a constellation”...It is elevated surplus in an otherwise reserved and meditative film...This is the viral irruption of the awful irrational into bourgeois life.

Lisa Coulthard similarly describes this violence in terms of excess. In reference to Majid's suicide and a similar moment of sudden violence in Haneke's *The Piano Teacher/ La Pianiste* (2001) she writes:

In each of these examples, the effect is one of visual surplus, but a surplus that reveals the fundamental shortcomings of knowledge or comprehension. These long takes and sequences are not explanatory or orchestrated for emotional impact alone but are emphatic indications of intersubjective failure: we are faced with the results, the consequences, not with the motivations or causes. Their acts do not therefore communicate but effect...they put us in a place where it is impossible to respond within the parameters of familiar symbolic exchange. There is no "proper" response immediately at hand. ("Ethical Violence" 47)

Key to both scholars' reactions is a sense that the abrupt violence is excessive, without clear meaning, and involves us in some way—in Nair's assessment, our response is to "hit rewind," in Coulthard's we are compelled to respond, and yet "there is no 'proper' response." These reactions gesture towards the fundamental dynamic that informs my argument about the films studied in this project. This thesis will address a trend in European art cinema<sup>1</sup> that sees representations of violence within the everyday utilised to disturbing affect. The films explored share aesthetic strategies that attempt to provoke an experience of discomfort by preventing viewers from containing moments of violence with a coherent meaning or motivation, extending the films' grip on their experience beyond the closing credits.<sup>2</sup> I argue that this dynamic plays out in a variety of ways. These include involving viewers in hermeneutic problems that cannot be adequately solved, paring back style to withhold cues that would typically prepare viewers for moments of violence or guide their response, orienting viewers' expectations only to radically usurp them, and structurally embodying the temporal quality of the everyday's combination of the momentous and the perpetual.

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that this is a highly contested term. According to Catherine Fowler, the concept of European cinema is a critical construct for "outside the critical field there is no 'European cinema'" (1). Likewise, Thomas Elsaesser argues that any examination of European cinema "should start with the statement that there is no such thing as European cinema, and that yes, European cinema exists, and has existed since the beginning of cinema" (*European Cinema* 13). The term has typically been used to describe national cinemas in Europe. Considering the rise in transnational productions, however, I find it feasible to use the term European cinema in regards to these films. This is not to suggest European cinema is a monolithic entity, but to acknowledge the diverse range of funding bodies that go into single projects. Luisa Rivi explains that as European nations have their own established industries and styles, the rise in transnational production hints at the tension between visions of Europe as individual and global (39-41).

<sup>2</sup> While this notion of a film extending its grip on us beyond the moment of consumption in troubling ways could hardly be considered unique to what I am here defining as disturbing cinema—one might think of the enduring grip of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) on swimmers, for example—the distinguishing feature of the kind of affect I seek to articulate in the films explored in this thesis pertains specifically to an inability to reconcile violence with a coherent meaning. Spielberg's shark may still make us think twice about swimming in the ocean, however, I would argue that unlike instances of violence in the films covered in this project, *Jaws* provides us with both cues as to imminent danger through the use of music, and also a clear motivation for this violence. As this thesis will show, the films representative of disturbing affect as I define here, actively withhold the conduits needed to make sense of violence.



While parallels can be drawn with the horror genre in terms of violent content, what sets the disturbing apart is the formal treatment of this violence. Where genre cinema cues viewer expectations and response, the films examined here are typified in part by their refusal of generic guidance, or the establishment of familiar orienting structures which are then transgressed without warning. I will argue that these films gesture towards the profound; the intrusion of horrific violence into everyday spaces, and our own uncomfortable involvement, suggests the potential to reveal something about human nature, and yet the significance or meaning of this violence remains undefined. This denial of clarity refuses attempts at hermeneutic closure, and extends the films' affective quality beyond the moment of consumption.

I have identified a number of films representative of this trend including *Money/ L'argent* (Bresson 1983), *The Vanishing/ Spoorloos* (Sluizer 1988), *The Seventh Continent/ Der siebente Kontinent* (Haneke 1989), *Fat Girl/ À ma soeur!* (Breillat 2001), and *Michael* (Schleinzer 2011). Several peripheral examples that share stylistic or thematic concerns will also be considered. This study is positioned within a burgeoning field of academic interest, intersecting with trends and cycles which have been attributed with several names, the “new extremism,” (Quandt “Flesh and Blood” originally published in 2004, and Horeck and Kendall *The New Extremism* in 2011) “cinema of sensation,” (Beugnet *Cinema and Sensation* 2007) “cinema of evil,” (Maddock and Krisjansen “Surrealist Poetics” 2002) and “unwatchable” (Grønstad *Screening the Unwatchable* 2012) to name a few. Due to the emphasis on violence and the self-reflexive modes of addressing the viewer there is some crossover between my research and the examples listed above, however, where scholarship employing these terms has largely been concerned with extremes in representations of sexuality and violence, this thesis attends to the often overlooked significance of the ordinary.

## **Context, Theory and Approaches**

Before exploring the role of the everyday in disturbing European art cinema, it is essential to consider the recent attention to a trend in filmmaking that emerged in the 1990s and set out to challenge the audience, as my own corpus intersects with this trend to a large extent. Citing a number of provocative directors including François Ozon, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat, Marina de Van, and Bruno Dumont, critic James Quandt's 2004 *Artforum* article “Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema” highlights a concentration of transgressive filmmaking he

reluctantly terms the “New French Extremity.”<sup>3</sup> Quandt argues the graphic violence and explicit sex once maligned in exploitation movies is now being taken up by art cinema:

Bava as much as Bataille, *Salò* no less than Sade seem the determinants of a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement. (18)

Here Quandt refers to notorious instances of sex and violence, including the brutal climax to Dumont’s otherwise slow paced and banal road movie *Twentynine Palms* (2003) in which the male protagonist is beaten and raped, before stabbing his girlfriend to death and (it seems) committing suicide. This is just one in a long list of provocative moments in a cinema seemingly designed to shock and confront. Another of the films Quandt discusses, the widely banned *Fuck Me/ Baise-moi* (Despentes and Trinh Thi 2000) synthesises the new extremity’s concerns with graphic sex and violence in a harrowing gang rape scene, controversially portrayed with shots of hard-core penetration.

Likewise, Lisa Downing points to a trend in recent French cinema “that blurs the boundaries between art film and porno flick, and that problematises the representation of explicit sexual activity by the inclusion of an admixture of violence” (265). European cinema scholar Ginette Vincendeau also notes the trend in her review of Breillat’s sexually explicit *Fat Girl*. Citing directors such as Patrice Chéreau, Leos Carax, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, Vincendeau evokes “the by now well documented recent tendency in French auteur cinema to explore themes of sex through scenarios whose explicitness verges on the pornographic” (“Sisters, Sex, and Sitcom” 18). Later, in her entry on “The New French Extremism” for Pam Cook’s *The Cinema Book*, Vincendeau writes that while the films are diverse, they “are united by a desire to blur boundaries: between auteur and popular cinema, good and bad taste, high and low culture” (205). Praising *Fat Girl* as a “powerfully acid piece of film-making” (“Sisters, Sex, and Sitcom” 20), Vincendeau points out common accusations that such films aim to draw the notice of festivals and critics with escalating explicitness, flaunting “more nudity, more erections, more violence and more outré sexual practices” (18).

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this introductory chapter I use the “new extremism” as an umbrella term for this tendency. This, in my reading seems to be the most dominant and accepted term to capture the trend. I employ it also for ease of reading, due to the level of overlap between varying texts and titles given to this trend. It should be noted that not all of the scholars and critics mentioned are looking at the tendency as a whole; some are focused on particular directors, national cinemas, or types of representation. I have tried to indicate this where relevant.

Film critic Jonathan Romney and cinema scholar Tim Palmer have likewise noted this tendency towards extreme representation, albeit in more forgiving terms. Romney highlights a trend of French films typified by representations of “graphic sexuality, violence and a sense of social apocalypse” (“Le Sex and Violence”), whereas Palmer evokes a French “*cinéma du corps*,” a group of “arthouse dramas and thrillers with deliberately discomfiting features” and “whose basic agenda is an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate forms” (*Brutal Intimacy* 57). While both writers acknowledge the commercial value of controversy, their defence of the new extreme films is linked to recognition of aesthetic worth and the significance of these films’ capacity for affect.

In an article for *The Independent*, “Le Sex and Violence,” Romney suggests that what we are witness to in this trend is a generation of filmmakers desperate to distinguish themselves from “the bombastic pastoralism of the Jean de Florette school” and to achieve notice with notoriety. He goes on to argue, however, that in spite of this, the stylistic innovation of these films, from Breillat and de Van’s “austere detachment” to Noé’s “lapel grabbing kineticism” should not escape recognition. In contrast to Quandt’s outrage, Romney gives a more measured response, both contextualising the turn to extremism within a wider history of transgression in French art, film and literature, and positing that its renewed prominence may be a reaction to contemporary cultural concerns, specifically an overly bureaucratised public sphere.

Important here is the openness to engage seriously with the new extreme films, rather than dismiss them outright as excessive. Palmer notes the negative reception that new extreme films tend to receive:

Even when select critics offer sympathy, or defenses, their comments, in publications as internationally diverse as *Positif*, *Télérama*, *Sight and Sound*, and *The Boston Globe*, have frequently appeared in print alongside dismissive, hence mitigating, counter-reviews. (60)

Palmer is critical of the readiness to discard challenging films as devoid of value suggesting that such a negative position bespeaks a critical laziness, and he posits that rigorous consideration of the stylistic innovation of these films is a far more demanding task (60). Palmer thus argues that while the trend has garnered much attention, few have acknowledged its aesthetic potential “to generate profound, often challenging, sensory experiences” (58). As Palmer states:

We need to explore how such filmmaking attenuates or strategically abandons narrative;

how it conceives of acting and physical performance on-screen as the site of exposure and trauma; how it brilliantly radicalizes conventions of film style; and how, crucially, it overhauls the role of the film viewer, rejecting the traditionally passive, entertained onlooker to demand instead a viscerally engaged experiential participant. (60)

This affective quality, the sense that these films compromise the distance between film and viewer, forms the subject of Martine Beugnet's study *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*. Beugnet focuses on films by auteurs including Grandrieux, Dumont, Breillat, and Claire Denis, work "that gives precedence to the corporeal, material dimension of the medium" (32). Drawing on Deleuzian theory, phenomenology, and Georges Bataille's writing on transgression, Beugnet explores the way these films privilege corporeal sensation over traditional character and narrative, facilitating more proximate relations with the text:

The effect is an unsettling of the conventional vision-knowledge-mastery paradigm, in favour of a relation where the spectator may surrender, at least partly, a sense of visual control for the possibility of a sensuous encounter with the film—where the subject affectively yields into its object. (68)

Beugnet moves away from dominant approaches to cinema that aim to keep a firm division between the cerebral and the corporeal, and describes the capacity for the image to affect the spectator in ways that transgress notions that text and viewer are autonomous and separate. Whilst there is certainly some affinity here to the aims of my own research in relation to this idea of proximity between film and spectator, Beugnet's study is primarily concerned with the texture of images and their ability to trigger our senses beyond the visual and aural. My research considers this proximity in terms of the films' preclusion of closure: the tendency of these films to stylistically or structurally block viewers' ability to securely attribute meaning to instances of violent representation.

Affect, whether visceral or cognitive, is a recurring concern of writing on the new extremism. Indeed, while the inclusion of graphic violence and explicit sex in French, and by extension European, cinema is not in itself novel, as scholars writing on the new extremism highlight, the capacity of these films to affect viewers goes beyond challenging subject matter. In their 2011 edited collection *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall describe the affective dimension of the films that make up the "new extremism":

Reports of fainting, vomiting and mass walkouts have consistently characterised the reception of this group of art-house films, whose brutal and visceral images appear designed deliberately to shock or provoke the spectator. (1)

Here, Horeck and Kendall point to common responses that signal these films' attempt and ability to affect audiences in powerful and unpleasant ways. The controversy stirred by Noé's *Irreversible* (2002) at its Cannes screening is emblematic of this active evocation of displeasure; the BBC reported that up to 250 viewers walked out of the film, "some needing medical attention" ("Cannes Film Sickens Audience").

As its title suggests, Horeck and Kendall's edited collection seeks to investigate the new extremism's origins in 1990s French filmmaking, but also to consider its wider ramifications as a European phenomenon, extending the scope to investigate directors including Austria's Michael Haneke and Ulrich Seidl, and Russia's György Pálfi, amongst several others. Likewise, Richard Falcon in his 1999 article for *Sight and Sound* "Reality is Too Shocking" also sees this challenging form of filmmaking to be a European, rather than strictly French phenomenon. In a cinema "giving the commercially assimilable transgressions of North American movies a run for their money," auteurs of varying concerns and styles are united by "an aggressive desire to confront their audiences, to render the spectator's experience problematic" (11). Here Falcon points to a recurrent element in describing this phenomenon—the troubling of the text/ spectator relationship. Critics and scholars continue to grapple with this tendency towards provocation—Falcon himself refers to both a "new European cinema" (11) and a "cinema of confrontation" (13). Despite questions of taxonomy, however, the synthesis between antagonism on the part of the director (through content and/or mode of address) and its intended affects on the spectator (to confront, frustrate, disturb etc.) is frequently raised in both popular criticism<sup>4</sup> and scholarship, and is a key concern of this thesis.

The concept of provoking the viewer in ways that seem to encourage a more proximate relationship to violence in new extreme films shares some affinity with Linda Williams's writing on "body genres." Drawing on Carol Clover's work on the slasher film, Williams argues that horror, melodrama and pornography are manipulative because of their over-engrossing of bodily responses, defined in part by "an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance" ("Film Bodies" 5). Indeed, Williams argues that the lowbrow status of these genres is linked to their overt appeal to

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<sup>4</sup> The distinction I draw here is between academic, scholarly research and film reviews published in newspapers, magazines, journals, and online.

corporeality of the viewers (4). Williams's language is evocative of a textual "spilling over," of films not maintaining an appropriate sense of separation from their viewers. This provides an interesting point of comparison to the films of the new extremism, and my own research into the disturbing. For Williams, the pleasures of body genres are measured by the degree to which the spectator's body mimics the bodies on screen; viewers may scream in terror at a horror film, feel overwhelmed by sadness at a melodrama, or be compelled to orgasm in response to pornography (5). While there is certainly a level of similarity in this concept of texts breaching the boundary between themselves and spectators, body genres are still figured in terms of pleasurable response. Even apparently unpleasant responses like fear and sadness are held to be satisfying. This seems, though may not be, a far cry from the aggressive confrontation of the new extreme, and statements like Haneke's desire "to rape the spectator into independence" (Frey "A Cinema of Disturbance"), which suggest a genuine aspiration to do harm.

As Horeck and Kendall state, the new extreme's provocative quality brings "the notion of response to the fore, interrogating, challenging and often destroying the notion of a passive or disinterested spectator" (2). One does not simply watch a new extreme film, but is somehow implicated in its content. It is worth mentioning here a strand of scholarship that examines unpleasurable response to cinema in terms of a viewer's ethical relationship to cinema. Such an approach has become important to the scholarship on new extreme cinema, primarily concerned with questions of spectator involvement through self-reflexive style.<sup>5</sup> While some ethics-based studies tend towards making reductive generalisations, establishing a dichotomy between good art cinema, and bad classical cinema,<sup>6</sup> I want to mention two particularly good studies that are relevant to the goals of this thesis. Focussing on the cinema of Michael Haneke, for example, Catherine Wheatley argues that aesthetic reflexivity is intimately linked to a moral reflexivity on the part of the spectator who is implored to question their response to, or complicity in, the film they are watching. In contrast to the stylistic reflexivity of directors like Godard and Peckinpah whose work is a "vehicle for a political and moral agenda," Wheatley argues that Haneke employs reflexive style "to encourage a

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<sup>5</sup> By self-reflexive style, I refer to the various means by which films might call attention to themselves as constructed, therefore calling attention to the spectator's relationship to that construct. As Robert Stam defines, reflexivity is "the process by which texts, both literary and filmic, foreground their own production, their authorship, their intertextual influences, their reception, or their enunciation" (xiii). A pertinent example would be Michael Haneke's employment of direct address in *Funny Games* (1997). In this film, the physical and psychological torture of a family at the hands of two strangers is punctuated by one of the assailants' direct address to the viewer. In one instance, this character looks down the lens, addressing the viewer, and says "You're on their side, aren't you?"

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Wheatley notes this tendency as a product of the emergence of ethical concerns with film style from screen theory's political modernism which views Hollywood cinema as suspicious for its ideological values (*Michael Haneke's Cinema* 3).

more open-ended reflection on the spectator's part about moral questions" (5). Further, Wheatley states that Haneke's films:

bring into play the Kantian conception of the ethical agent as caught between two impulses: the impulse towards rationality and responsibility on the one hand, and the impulse towards pleasurable experience and away from unpleasure on the other. (7)

Similarly, in a compelling reading of Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003) as a "feel-bad film," Nikolaj Lübecker describes a dynamic whereby spectators are invited to desire cathartic release, only for that desire to be undermined, compelling the spectator to question their own involvement in the film and the ethical dilemma it presents. This occurs by encouraging viewers to identify with the film's central character, Grace, who after suffering at the sadism of others decides to exact bloody revenge. However, just before this vengeance is carried out, it is revealed that the character we are rooting for is not what she seems and we are therefore confronted by our own complicit desire for violence. Lübecker argues this dynamic is created by throwing distancing and emotional involvement into tension—Brechtian and Surrealist aesthetics respectively—in a formula that might be approximated as: "'So you want catharsis? So you want catharsis? Here you have it!... Was it really what you wanted?'" ("Lars von Trier's *Dogville*" 165). For Lübecker, this dynamic—also present in Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997)—turns "the cinematic experience into a visceral practice that pushes the spectator towards ethical reflection" (167).

While my own research does not engage with questions of ethical implications, I am intrigued by Wheatley and Lübecker's theorisation here, as they seem to be gesturing towards a dynamic that is similar to the one I argue is at play in the idea of disturbing affect. For Wheatley, our cause for ethical reflection in response to a Haneke film is attributable in part to a lack of clear guidance as to how to respond to both the ethical problems raised, and an imperative to question the relationship between spectator and film: "[Haneke] does not offer a 'right' response, for the only correct response to Haneke's films to reach one's own conclusion" (*Michael Haneke's Cinema* 9). Likewise, Lübecker's claims regarding our ethical involvement in von Trier's film are reliant on a frustration of clarity—this time in relation to our subject position.

Both Wheatley and Lübecker describe a dynamic whereby a lack of clear meaning as to on-screen representation is linked to an unpleasurable compromise of the boundary between text and

spectator. This sense of proximity becomes even more pertinent when considered in relation to representations of violence, raising another central concern of this thesis: the way in which disturbing films lack a reassuring sense of “containment.” Grønstad’s account of his response to a European trend he calls “the unwatchable,” film images that “made their violent disruptions experientially palpable as sensorial and cognitive assaults” (*Screening* 1) gestures towards this concern. Despite describing a range of ostensibly unpalatable responses to violent films such as Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971), Grønstad notes “the unpleasant and provocative were carefully contained within the fictional universe, within impregnable diegetic barricades” (2). This sense of aesthetic distance between text and viewer is compromised in the new extreme films, “it is as if their violent energy has burst through the membrane of the work to target the spectators themselves” (2). Examining the work of Dumont, Haneke, Noé and Breillat amongst others, Grønstad describes a tradition that “aims sometimes to question, other times to destroy the sensation of visual pleasure and even to violate the moral or emotional consciousness of the viewer” (6). The language employed by Grønstad attributes these films not just with a provocative tendency, but the ability to physically and/ or mentally damage spectators by transgressing the diegesis.

Grønstad’s comparison between the affective quality of violence in new extreme films, as well as older films such as *A Clockwork Orange* and *Straw Dogs*, points to a need to better articulate just what this affective quality is, and how it might function. Crucial to this thesis is the idea that certain examples of European art cinema do indeed breach their “diegetic barricades,” and that through a range of stylistic and structural strategies pertaining to violent representation, viewers are prevented from carefully containing the films’ fictional universes. But just what does Grønstad mean when he refers to the carefully contained fictional universes of *A Clockwork Orange* and *Straw Dogs*? And why do the “unwatchable” films of the new extremity bother him in a way Peckinpah’s and Kubrick’s do not? The reasons why there might be a difference between films like *A Clockwork Orange* and *Straw Dogs* and examples evoked deemed by Grønstad as “unwatchable” is a vital consideration if we are going to maintain that there is indeed something distinctive in new extreme films. As Charles Barr notes in his careful unpacking of the critical disdain directed towards *Straw Dogs* upon its release in 1971, much of the contempt expressed in reviews pertained to an uneasy involvement in violent representation, in violence that, through specific aspects of the film’s style and complex ethical positioning, “is not kept comfortably remote” (“*Straw Dogs*” 26).



It is not that I disagree with Grønstad's observations in principle. I do think there is a difference in the affective quality of Peckinpah's film and the films explored in this thesis, and that most probably this pertains again to the distinction between pleasurable and unpleasurable engagement. To quote Barr on *Straw Dogs* again:

We feel the intense provocation the hero is subjected to, and feel a release when he responds in kind... as David clubs Cawsey to death with his poker, one cannot—I cannot—avoid to some degree sharing their exultation. Everything in the director's staging contributes to our physical involvement. (26)

Barr attributes this involvement to specific examples in Peckinpah's treatment of style and character which work to disarm an oversimplification of the film's violence and its meaning. The issue is one of specificity, which Grønstad's study eschews. I wish to point out the need to clearly articulate the nature of what is meant by *this* affect, in *these* films, as opposed to *that* affect in *those*, lest we fall back on normative categories whereby America is always and already in opposition to its European Other.

This idea of textual containment, which I refer to over the course of this project, also bears clarifying. I have already referred to Linda Williams's description of "body genres" as having an affective quality akin to a textual "spilling over," compromising the distinction between film and viewer. Similarly, Grønstad's description of "unwatchable" films as lacking the "impregnable diegetic barricades" of other works of cinematic violence too is evocative of an aesthetic and affective potential of certain texts to "overflow." I find this notion of a film as something comparable to a container—a fixed entity with a fixed volume that can be filled or emptied by its owner, to be a useful metaphor in articulating the kind of affective quality disturbing films possess. While I will unpack precisely what I mean by disturbing affect a little later in this introduction, it is worth signalling here that the films explored in this thesis are linked by an aesthetic quality that in various ways prevents us from "containing" them. This is to say that the films in this thesis block attempts at textual closure through the treatment of violent representation as something ultimately indeterminate. In this sense the notion of containment refers to both a containment of meaning (that would allow us the hermeneutic closure of being able to ascribe meaning to acts of on-screen violence) and a containment of the text itself (a kind of affective closure as opposed to the unsettling openness that I argue the films in this thesis effect in their various means of gesturing beyond themselves).

One of the challenges that this project takes up is to describe the specificity of what is here termed disturbing affect as it is manifested in a number of contemporary European art films. Implicit in this is the need to articulate precisely why “disturbing” is an applicable term to describe a particular kind of affect. Before detailing this however, I need to address one of the key distinctions I draw between my own research and previous scholarship on new extreme cinema, namely, the significance of the everyday.

### **From extremism to everyday**

As previously mentioned, where dominant scholarship on what is undoubtedly a recent trend in transgressive filmmaking tends to privilege these films’ extreme aspects (explicit representations of/ or actual sex, graphic representations of sexual violence, moments of extreme violence etc.) and acute spectatorial responses (reports of mass walkouts, vomiting, fainting etc.), this thesis explores the relationship between such moments of transgression, particularly moments of violence, and the everyday. Of course “the everyday” is a highly contested term which I will turn to in a moment, but for now, by way of illustration, it will suffice to say that these films are strongly concerned with domestic themes (home, family), everyday routines, and institutions/ institutionalised spaces (workplace, school). Despite instances of violence that seem to disrupt the everyday, to pull us out of the realm of the ordinary, these films do not abandon verisimilitude. Neither scenarios nor imagery enter the fantastic; instances of violence are always perpetrated by people (as opposed to monsters or supernatural forces), and representations of violence are not stylistically divorced from representations of the ordinary. One of the main contentions of this thesis, indeed, is that while instances of violence in these films appear to wrench us from the ordinary, they do not propel us into the extraordinary.

There is a link here to questions of realism—another highly contested term, of course. Significant, however, is the relationship between the everyday evoked in these films and the everyday as it exists outside of its artistic representation. As Terry Lovell points out:

To investigate realism in art is immediately to enter into philosophical territory—into questions of ontology and epistemology: of what exists in the world, and how that world can be known. (6)

The relationship between “realism” and “the everyday” in these films forms a recurring concern throughout the chapters that follow. Indeed much of the purchase these films have on our experience is garnered through their relationship to our own sense of daily life, often through the emphasis on familiar activities and routines. Brushing teeth, doing the dishes, and going to work, for example, are not reduced to the background to furnish the eventful; they not only occupy a great deal of screen time, but are the very medium through which the eventful must occur.

Furthermore, the relation of realism to the everyday is further intertwined in a philosophical sense. As Christopher Williams argues:

Philosophically, the debate about realism can perhaps best be grasped through the opposition between “mere appearances,” meaning the reality of things as we perceive them in daily life and experience, and “true reality,” meaning an essential truth, one which we cannot normally see or perceive, but which in Hegel’s phrase, is “born of the mind.” (11)

Williams’s statement here helps to articulate one of the fundamental concerns of this thesis, which is to say the distinction between the everyday and the profound (if indeed there is a distinction to be made). This is to consider realism as pertaining to something authentic and essential, something not necessarily immediately apparent, rather than as a mimetic representation of the world as it appears. As I will explore shortly, the question of profundity and the location of authentic experience (as either deeply embedded in the everyday, or something necessarily separate from it) proves vital to the way the everyday has been understood as a critical concept. While the following discussion of theoretical conceptions of the everyday relates to the sphere of the lived world rather than its representation, what I attempt to develop over the course of the project as a whole is the consideration of the everyday as both subject matter and aesthetic sensibility, which theories of the everyday necessarily illuminate.

Drawing on the everyday as a unifying element in these films is both instructive and limiting; it affords a strong coherence but also means that the more fantastic films that would normally be considered to form part of the trend examined here—such as György Pálfi’s magical realist film *Taxidermia* (2006), Lars von Trier’s supernaturally tinged *Antichrist* (2009), Andrej Zulawski’s Surrealist rendering of domestic dysfunction as otherworldly in *Possession* (1981), and Bruno Dumont’s divinely inflected *Humanity* (1999), all of which contain unsettling content—can only form peripheral examples. What this narrow focus enables, however, is a new approach to these

extreme films by focusing on the importance of the everyday as a crucial element of the affective responses that they elicit.

In order to discuss the deployment of the everyday in these films, it is important to qualify just what is meant by “the everyday.”<sup>7</sup> Despite its long history in cultural studies, philosophy, and aesthetics, the everyday is far from having a fixed meaning. As Rita Felski explains:

it typically encompasses such commonplace activities as eating, sleeping, getting dressed, working, home-making, and routine forms of travel, as well as the often elaborate rituals, taboos, protocols, performances, and other symbolic activities that encircle and define them. (“Introduction” 607)

Here Felski points to a traditional conceptualising of the everyday as a kind of backdrop—pertaining to the imperceptible, the essential, the taken for granted. This idea also frames the everyday as “uneventful,” as encapsulated in Maurice Blanchot’s statement, “nothing happens; this is the everyday” (*The Infinite Conversation* 241). Considerations of the everyday as background have been conceived both in positive terms (ideas of the quotidian holding fundamental truths about humanity which can be discovered if attended to) and negative terms (conceptions of the everyday as a mundane, repetitive system from which we cannot escape, and the source of alienation). I will take some time now to outline these varying conceptions of the everyday—as positive, negative, and indeterminate—as these interpretations prove important to the way theories of the everyday have been applied to film aesthetics in the past, as well as in articulating my own position regarding the treatment of the everyday in disturbing cinema as indeterminate.

Michael Sheringham documents these varying conceptions as characteristic of criticism on the everyday, noting that the quotidian tends to be defined negatively. Dictionary definitions often connect everydayness with the inconsequential, the fruitless and the spurious, in contrast to what is significant and eventful (*Everyday Life* 23). Regarded this way, the everyday renders us passive—it is something we necessarily endure, and something “we must extricate ourselves from if we are to live authentically” (23). Felski points out that such extrication has been argued to come in the form of aesthetic experience, either in high art, or modernist movements like Surrealism which sought to

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<sup>7</sup> Rather than an exhaustive account, I will here provide a broad overview of some of the key ways the everyday has been theoretically conceived over time as the particularities of certain conceptions will be expanded upon in later chapters where relevant.

jolt the senses and render the familiar strange (“Introduction” 608). Such encounters with art are thought to disrupt the everyday’s circadian temporality, awakening perception from mindless habit (608).

For Georg Lukács release comes in the form of extraordinary and miraculous moments that wrench us from the “numbness” of the ordinary:

Real life is always unreal, always impossible, in the midst of empirical life. Suddenly there is a gleam, a lightning that illuminates the banal paths of empirical life: something disturbing and seductive, dangerous and surprising; the accident, the great moment, the miracle; an enrichment and a confusion. It cannot last, no one would be able to bear it, no one could live at such heights—at the height of their own life and their own ultimate possibilities. One has to fall back into numbness. (*Soul and Form* 153)

Here Lukács distinguishes between the banality of the quotidian and the elevated sphere of “real life.” Paroxysmal instants interrupt the monotonous to reveal the genuine. Lukács saw a dichotomy between the ordinary which is alienated and institutionalised, and the soul which is the realm of personal autonomy, where self-realisation is possible (Aitken *Realist Film* 70). As Ian Aitken explains:

Lukács conceives of the domain of the soul as one which strives to transcend ordinary life, not only through forms of individuated resistance but through an attempt to glimpse the totality of things. (70)

In this conception, profundity is located outside of everyday life, fundamentally antithetical to its alienating structures and impositions. Sheringham points out that less negative conceptions of the everyday have taken issue with this equation, citing Henri Lefebvre’s contention that the everyday is not simply a vacuum in wait of the marvellous (*Everyday Life* 19-20). Rather, Lefebvre argues that it is concentration on that which often goes overlooked that has the potential to reveal profundity: “Are not the surreal, the extraordinary, the surprising, even the magical, also part of the real? Why wouldn’t the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary?” (“The Everyday and Everydayness” 9). In his seminal *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre argues that by attending to the microstructures of everyday life (work, leisure, family life, private life), positive aspects of the quotidian can be rescued from those which alienate (1:42). Similarly, Michel de Certeau has argued that despite the constraints of everyday life, the quotidian is filled with creative

potential. For de Certeau the same structures and mechanisms deemed oppressive and inauthentic in negative conceptions of the everyday are subverted daily by ordinary people who adapt them for their own purposes. De Certeau likens the pedestrian's reappropriation of city streets—with their implicit limitations on one's movement—into shortcuts and detours to the manifold possibilities improvised in Charlie Chaplin's cane: "he does other things with the same thing and he goes beyond the limits that the determinants of the object set on its utilization" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 98).

De Certeau conceives of the everyday as something that can be reclaimed from its alienating aspects. Sheringham notes an affinity between de Certeau's ideas and those of American philosopher Stanley Cavell (*Everyday Life* 229-233). In the tradition of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Cavell's conception of the everyday is rooted in a need to reconnect with the world by acknowledging the everyday. It is important to outline here one of Cavell's key concepts "the plight of scepticism," as it leads to what we might regard as a positive conception of the everyday, and becomes an important foundation of Klevan's writing on everyday film style in chapter three (Klevan *Disclosure* 11-12).

Klevan explains that Cavell's "plight of scepticism" is based on the notion that modern human consciousness has become dislocated from the world in the absence of certainty formerly provided by the belief in God, and later in government:

One might think of this as the disappearance of a common, objective point from which to understand and feel the world; indeed, our subjectivity was interposed between us and our "presentness" to the world...In wishing to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation, in craving to become present to the world, we transform it into something capable of satisfying this yearning. Thus paradoxically, we often escape from the world, we wish to find something beyond it. (*Disclosure* 11-12)

One might contrast Cavell's notion here to Lukács's evocation of the "the accident, the great moment, the miracle" that momentarily relieves us from the numbness of the ordinary. While Lukács speaks longingly of this disruptive instant that would take us out of the everyday, at the heart of Cavell's thinking is a call for us to overcome this yearning. Klevan summarises Cavell's thinking here:

we must embark on a quest to find fascination in the parts of the world we share (not parts we create privately), even though it is exactly those shared things that might appear boring because of their obviousness and repetition—indeed, because they occur each and every day. (*Disclosure* 23)

This brings us to a positive conception of the everyday, one which wishes not to escape or transcend the ordinary to locate the authentic, or the profound, but to acknowledge it. Emerson too captures this sense of the significance of the everyday, and yet, beyond Cavell's call to acknowledgement, Emerson's attention to the quotidian elevates it to levels of grandeur. Referring to literature, amongst other arts, Emerson conveys his pleasure in finding attention had been given to the ordinary:

Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized. That which had been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts...I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic...I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body;—show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on eternal law; and the shop, the plough, and the ledger referred to the like cause by which light undulates and poets sing;—and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle, there is no puzzle, but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench. ("The American Scholar" 101-2)

For Emerson, profundity and authenticity are located in the quotidian; they are in the near, the low, the common. And it is in attending to the everyday, its patterns and repetitions that we might access it.

Amongst positive and negative conceptions of the everyday, and adding to the difficulty of defining it, is the concept that the everyday rests in an inherent sense of indeterminacy. Over the course of the coming chapters, I will argue that it is this conception of the everyday as inherently ambiguous that best captures the kind of quotidian we see in disturbing cinema. As Felski has highlighted, the concept of "everyday life" is as perplexing as it is self-evident:

Everyday life is synonymous with the habitual, the ordinary, the mundane, yet it is also strangely elusive, that which resists our understanding and escapes our grasp. Like the blurred speck at the edge of one's vision that disappears when looked at directly, the everyday ceases to be everyday when it is subject to critical scrutiny. ("The Invention" 15)

Likewise, for Blanchot, the everyday is fraught with paradoxical ambiguity; nothing happens, and yet something is always happening (241); it is inaccessible and yet "we have always already had access" (245); it escapes apprehension (239), and yet it is "what we are first of all and most often" (238). Sheringham argues that this kind of indeterminacy is crucial to the everyday, and that taking a strictly positive, or strictly negative stance may be reductive: "To opt for positive or negative evaluations is to filter out the tensions that give the everyday its fruitful ambivalence, and above all its status as a sphere of human self-realization" (*Everyday Life* 30).

Framing the everyday as both uneventful and ambiguous presents some interesting associations with the framing of European art cinema. In his dissection of art cinema narration, David Bordwell (drawing on Marcel Martin), points to art cinema's tendency towards de-dramatisation "by showing both climaxes and trivial moments" (*Narration* 206). This de-dramatisation is linked to the art film's concern with real issues—Bordwell cites "alienation" and "lack of communication" as examples (206). Further, Bordwell notes the art film's concern with characters' psychological reaction, rather than narrative action (208). The content of art cinema is also connected to narrative strategies that lean towards indeterminacy. Character motivation, and causality between narrative events is at times unclear, for the narration may "play down character's causal projects, keep silent about their motives, emphasize 'insignificant' actions and intervals, and never reveal effects of actions" (207). Further, unanticipated or astonishing events may signal the narrative's "appeal to the plausible improbabilities of 'real life'" (207).

This idea that "real life" encompasses not only the expected, habitual and banal, but also moments of "plausible improbability" is important to consider in seeking to articulate the everyday and its cinematic representation. Felski warns that everyday life should not be considered as a comprehensive object, as no life is definitively anchored in the everyday, and that to assume so would "impose a fantasy of sameness" ("The Invention" 29):



Surely every life contains epiphanic moments, experiences of trauma and points of departure from mundane routines: religious ecstasy, sexual passion, drug-taking, childbirth, encounters with death or simply moments of distanced and thoughtful reflection on the meaning and purpose of one's life. (29)

Roger Silverstone likewise acknowledges that whilst the everyday consists of the routine and unacknowledged we also live “in a world of broken patterns, non-rational or duplicitous actions, irresolvable conflicts and unpredictable events” (7). For Silverstone the routines, activities and institutions of daily life form a defence against disorder:

In the ordering of daily life we avoid panic, we construct and maintain our identities, we manage our social relationships in time and space, shaping meanings, fulfilling our responsibilities, experiencing pleasure and pain, with greater or lesser degrees of satisfaction and control, but avoiding for the most part the blank and numbing horror of the threat of chaos. The institutions that we have inherited and which we still struggle to maintain: family, household, neighbourhood, community, nation (increasingly vulnerable perhaps and increasingly open to challenge as a result of social and technological change) are those institutions that have historically been the containers of, and provided the resources for, our ability to sustain that defence. That ability itself is grounded in turn in our ability, within the activities of our daily lives, to preserve a sense of continuity and reliability of things, to provide, as best we can, the necessary distance between us and the various threats to that continuity, either by denying them completely or by absorbing them, in one way, or another, into the fabric of our lives. (1-2)

Silverstone's conception of the everyday is one of militant defence; the home, institutions and routines are cultural constructs aimed at staving off disorder. This would seem to establish a binary between the regulation of the expected patterns and repetitions of the everyday and the potential turmoil of that which falls outside it. It is this very tension between established routine and the potential for turmoil that can be found in all of the films investigated in this thesis. Instances of violence in these films are rendered disturbing for their seeming break with the continuity of everyday patterns and the sense-making constructs we impose on daily life.

And yet, as this thesis will argue, the division between the contained, familiar, and stable everyday, and the unknown and volatile outside is superficial for the threat of disunity and violence is always already present. Georges Bataille's writing on the evolutionary origins of human work and taboos is useful in understanding this tension. Bataille argues that work, and taboos around death (the taboo on murder, and the taboo nature of the corpse, for example) distinguished humans from animals in the evolutionary process (*Erotism* 30). Both were in part established in the interest of repressing

violent impulses. In terms of work, productivity and efficiency necessitate rational behaviour and focussed exertion at odds with impulsive desire (41). Taboos around death, Bataille argues, arose for a number of reasons: primitive man's burying of a corpse for instance, protected it from animals, and banished the threat of violence, thought to be contagious (46). Where work was the realm of human reason and mastery, death was the realm of violence and disorder (45) and as such, taboos were employed to regulate it. There are echoes here in the inside/ outside, order/ disorder binaries that categorise Silverstone's figuring of the everyday as a construction aimed at containment and control. However, in Bataille's writing, violence is an innate threat that the world of work seeks to keep at bay but can never fully eradicate:

Man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence. Nature herself is violent, and however reasonable we may grow we may be mastered anew by a violence no longer that of nature but that of a rational being who tries to obey but who succumbs to stirrings within himself which he cannot bring to heel. (40)

Bataille's formulation here illuminates a key tension in these films that brings positive and negative conceptions of the everyday into conversation. Violence is regarded as an inherent impulse that must be mediated through imposed patterns of continuity and order, and yet as inherent, it cannot be ultimately quelled. Like negative conceptions of the everyday that see routine and repetition as an incubator of alienation, it is arguable that where ordering the quotidian might seek to suppress violence, it in fact acts as a breeding ground. For example, one could argue that the clinical treatment of routine tasks in *The Seventh Continent*, or the lifeless performance of household routine in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman/ Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) propose a distinctively negative representation of the quotidian that culminates in both films' violent denouements. However, I argue that these films complicate binaries of the everyday as positive or negative, shields or incubators for violence, and instead explore the way the indeterminacy of art cinema narration compliments evocations of the everyday as itself indefinite. This project aims to demonstrate the way the tension between violence and everyday patterns such as work is negotiated in these films to produce disturbing affect. I will argue that the films in this thesis aesthetically engage with the "fruitful ambivalence" of the everyday to disturbing affect through an indeterminacy in representation. Moments of violence appear to be the "lightning that illuminates the banal" to borrow from Lukács (*Soul and Form* 153); such instances gesture towards a profound significance and yet, as will be demonstrated, the stylistic and structural methods employed are marked by a refusal to define the meaning of this violence and offer closure.

This thesis focuses on films that have a fundamental engagement with the everyday. Occurring at the level of subject matter, the everyday is evident with the privileging of the domestic, familial, and day-to-day, and in varying gradations, at the level of style. The notion of the everyday as a category of film style is developed in detail in chapter three with reference to the scholarship of Paul Schrader and Andrew Klevan, however it generally pertains to a stripping back of the expressive possibilities of the medium, a de-dramatisation of narrative events through a tempering of style and performance.

### Approaching affect

The films explored in this thesis, while at times utilising shock tactics, are predominantly concerned with evoking a lingering sense of unease. In doing so, films such as these seek to extend the aesthetic experience of discomfort beyond the immediacy of consumption.<sup>8</sup> In order to articulate what is meant by employing the term “disturbing” as a kind of affect, it is worth outlining some previous approaches to studying affect in cinema, before positioning my own approach.

“Affect” is a rather broad term in film studies. Noël Carroll uses the term to refer to “felt bodily states – states that involve feelings or sensations” (*Philosophy of Motion Pictures* 149). Similarly, Torben Grodal states “affect is a general non-specific term for emotions and drives” (*Moving Pictures* 5). Carl Plantinga, however, regards “affect” to be a wider term than “emotion”:

Affects are any felt bodily state, including a wide range of phenomena, including emotions, moods, reflex actions, automatic responses, mirror reflexes, desires, pleasures, etc. (“Emotion and Affect” 87)

Plantinga goes on to distinguish emotions as necessitating an object, thus bearing some kind of intentionality—in the sense that fear, love, or hatred are emotions directed at someone or something, and moods “thought to be longer lasting and more diffuse than emotions proper” (87). Moods, Plantinga suggests, need not take an object—in the way that we may be in a good mood “for no apparent reason,” (87) however, this is not necessarily the case. Drawing on Peter Goldie, Plantinga points out that one’s mood is at times in response to one’s emotions (87). I suspect the

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<sup>8</sup> I do not mean to suggest that disturbing affect is limited to cinema. A great deal of artwork seeks to extend one’s experience of it, and I expect that there is scope to explore the meaning-blocking dynamic that this thesis outlines in mediums beyond film.

“disturbing” (which will be defined shortly) is best considered a kind of mood under the broader term of affect, due to its longevity (staying with us after a film’s conclusion).

Academic research into affecting cinema has largely concentrated on cognitive or phenomenological approaches. A cognitive approach to film affect examines the text as stimulus for perceptual and cognitive response. Noël Carroll (*Philosophy of Motion Pictures* 147-89) scrupulously charts contending theories that seek to interrogate our ability to be affected by fictional narratives, weighing up the stability of reflex states, identification, simulation, schematic interpretation and mimicry. The most basic, universal and readily observable of these are reflex states:

Through the manipulation of sound and image, the creators of moving images can induce changes in our bodies....Moreover, moving-image arrays have the power to activate the involuntary and automatic reflexes of audiences at a subcognitive, or cognitively impenetrable, level of response. (149)

Carroll refers to instinctual reactions, such as being startled by a loud noise, sudden camera movement or our natural aversion to collective phobias such as spiders (150). Carroll differentiates these “somewhat primitive responses” from our “more discerning” and complex emotional engagement with texts (151) expressed in feelings such as “fear, pity, levity, anger, sadness, and so forth” (155).

Carroll’s linking of authorial intention with viewer response calls attention to a filmmaker’s potential to deliberately activate both reflex and emotion through stylistic choices. This is not to suggest that audience alignment is completely at the whim of directorial decisions,<sup>9</sup> but to signal the importance of analysing film style in illuminating our understanding of a given text’s affective qualities. Carroll’s account of our engagement with films and the pleasures they elicit employs a reasoning that resembles Aristotle’s employment of the term “catharsis” both in the purgative and educative sense. Aristotle’s use of this word is still debated today; there are, however, two dominant schools of thought regarding its meaning. One suggests that catharsis is a process of cleansing by which negative emotions may be flushed from the body. Contrarily, the term is also interpreted to refer to a process of training the emotions through clarification, educating audiences as to how to

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<sup>9</sup> Carroll also dissects “asymmetric emotions” (*Philosophy of Motion Pictures* 165-7).

manage them in real life (Pappas 17).<sup>10</sup> Carroll argues that films allow us access to experiences that might in reality be dangerous or traumatic, “cost-free” (150) and that “it is the function of these affect systems to evaluate the circumstances before us...and to prepare us to react appropriately” (151).

Similarly, Bordwell takes a cognitive approach to understanding the viewer’s relation to cinema. Drawing on Constructivist theory, which posits that “perceiving and thinking are active, goal-oriented processes,” (*Narration* 31) Bordwell argues that films present cues which viewers interpret by forming hypotheses (33). For Bordwell, viewers make sense of screen narratives by inferring probable connections and anticipating outcomes, which are then confirmed, undermined, or left open (38). While Bordwell’s account does not focus on affect, he acknowledges that the cognitive process of hypothesis building and trial can influence emotions (38-9).

In contrast to cognitive approaches that examine film’s capacity to trigger set responses through the manipulation of sound and image, a phenomenological approach to film affect attempts to account for the filmgoer’s experience as “embodied” by redressing the gap between objective phenomena and subjective consciousness (Sobchack “Phenomenology” 436). Vivian Sobchack argues that where film theory tends to objectify spectatorial experience, the body becoming an abstraction “belonging always to someone else,” (*Carnal Thoughts* 1) phenomenology considers the filmic experience “as spatially and temporally embodied, lived, and valued by an objective subject—and, as such, always already qualified by the mutable specificities and constraints of history and culture” (2).

While some phenomenological scholarship on new extreme cinema has proven quite illuminating, particularly Martine Beugnet’s *Cinema and Sensation* which provides an excellent account of the relation between Bataille’s writings on transgression and the new extreme’s attempts at sensorial involvement, I wish to signal here my decision not to take a phenomenological approach in analysing the films in this thesis. My dissatisfaction with phenomenological approaches to film pertains to what I believe to be an overemphasis on personal subjectivity that results in a turning away from the text as a stable object for study. While I understand the motivation to question monolithic assumptions about audiences, it strikes me that phenomenological readings tend to

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive history of this debate see Pappas (15-24), Lear (315-339), Neill (457-61) and Shields (386-91).

engage in a reactive overcompensation that privileges the individual and exceptional to a level that serves to obfuscate rather than clarify meaning. For example, in the introduction to *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Sobchack states:

The proof of an adequate phenomenological description, then, is not whether or not the reader has actually had—or even is in sympathy with—the meaning and value of an experience as described—but whether or not the description is resonant and the experience’s structure sufficiently comprehensible to a reader who might “possibly” inhabit it (even if in a differently inflected or valued way). (5)

The immediacy of subjective experience is here emphasised to the degree that the text itself seems unimportant. While one’s experience is a necessary precondition to any kind of criticism, such an assertion suggests that it need not be held accountable to the text as an object that can be returned to. Resonance does not equate to constructive elucidation, and that a reader “might ‘possibly’ inhabit” a described experience, to me, seems an inadequate criteria for good criticism. For instance, Sobchack’s entry on phenomenology in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* seeks to demonstrate the methodology and value of the approach through a “concrete example,” (“Phenomenology” 437) applying phenomenology to Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993):

In the “natural attitude,” it is described as monochromatic—“only” blue—with an unchanging, “empty” visual field of bright cobalt, this accompanied by a soundtrack woven of voices, sound effects, music, and first-person narration that eloquently describes Jarman’s medical, social, and emotional journey towards blindness and imminent death. (437)

Sobchack explains, however that using a phenomenological approach, or “in experience rather than presumption,” (437) the frame is not empty at all but inhabited by scratches on the film that appear and disappear. Nor is it “only” blue, for subjective and perceptual factors such as the tricks of the eye when we redirect our focus, and whether we are attentive or fatigued alter the force of the hue (437). Sobchack concludes that phenomenology “reveals *Blue* as not only objectively *about* the richness, complexity, and sensuality of visual perception (as well as its loss) but also as subjectively constituting for viewers an *experience* of extreme self-reflection on their own dynamics of vision” (437). As valid as such assertions regarding the possibilities of perceptual response may be, however, I am not convinced they add anything to an understanding of the film. That one’s attentiveness or fatigue will alter our experience is an observation applicable to any work of art. I do not mean to suggest that one’s affective responses to films are not valuable, or that complete objectivity in description and interpretation is possible, only that, if we want to understand how films work and invite responses, the films themselves should be of primary importance.

Stanley Cavell's admittedly inaccurate memory of details from the hunt sequence in Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939) is instructive as to why returning to films is important. In the expanded edition of *The World Viewed*, Cavell describes forming an argument based on details that he later realised were mistaken. Reflecting on the nature of interpretation, Cavell remarks:

Reading is not an alternative to seeing but (as its root in a word for advising suggests) an effort to detail a way of seeing something more clearly, an interpretation of how things look and why they appear as, and in the order, they do...A reading, like any recitation, is by all means to be checked for its accuracy. It should also be thought of as an argument, something requiring a response. (xiii)

The key distinction to be made here is between an approach that attempts to capture one's experience in its immediacy, and an approach that necessitates reflection. To think of one's experience and interpretation of a film as an argument requiring a response demands a return to the film to confirm one's reactions, to see if evidence can be located on screen to support one's claims.

Victor Perkins is helpful in clarifying my stance here:

The precise manner in which any spectator involves himself in the action of a movie, the nuances of his alignment with the actions and aspirations of particular characters, will necessarily be controlled by his personality and experience. But critical judgment depends on demonstrating the validity of a response, on showing that it is inherent in the logic of the presentation and therefore depends on a predictability of *dominant* responses. (*Film as Film* 141).

Drawing on Perkins's assertion, I aim to ground my claims as to the films' intention to "disturb" viewers in demonstrable examples from the texts themselves. This is not to argue that "the viewer" is a cohesive category that can be said to respond in delimited ways determined by the text, rather it is to posit that the films examined in this thesis are designed to encourage discomfort in the audience through observable aesthetic choices. As John Gibbs and Douglas Pye argue, appealing to what is discernibly apparent in a film acknowledges the text as both a stable object that can be consulted to substantiate or invalidate claims, and grounds for "sharable experience" (4).

While this statement might suggest an affinity with a cognitive approach, and indeed this study engages with some of the same goals as cognitive theory in examining the relationship between narrative structure, screen aesthetics, and the manipulation of viewer interpretation and response, my approach is not strictly a cognitive one. I feel cognitive theory risks being too prescriptive; while more stable and constructive than phenomenological approaches, mapping a series of cues and responses tends towards reducing the text to a skeletal series of causes and effects rather than a

complex aesthetic achievement. Again, Perkins is helpful here. Noting the tendency to scale one's focus down to a string of narrative proceedings, he counters:

But film drama is more than a succession of events, and a cause-and-effect approach can confine us in a mechanistic view not only of human affairs but of narrative as well...An event becomes a cause only in its relation to webs of circumstance, together with, say desires and fears. Why a cause should be understood as a cause, and why an effect should count as an effect, are matters that can be assessed only within a world. ("Where is the World?" 22)

Alex Clayton's critique of Bordwell and Thompson's response to *His Girl Friday* (Hawks 1940) provided in the textbook *Film Art* is also useful in illustrating this contention. Clayton argues that it is reductive to describe a film by imposing detached terms like "cause" and "effect." Rather than aiding our understanding, such terms evoke lines of dominoes "splitting and converging in an intricate (but essentially meaningless) display" (*Language and Style* 29). Further, such general expressions lose traction when applied to the particular (32). Clayton instead calls for, in the tradition of Stanley Cavell, attempts to reconnect with the film "on its own terms" (36). This means to use language to engage with films in their complexity, rather than to treat them as puzzles to be solved; it is to acknowledge, not to master.

To reconnect with a film "on its own terms" is, I believe, the aspiration of the film style analysis of critics like Cavell (*Contesting Tears; The World Viewed*), Clayton ("Coming to Terms"; "The Texture of Performance"), Perkins (*Film as Film; The Magnificent Ambersons*), Klevan (*Disclosure of the Everyday; Film Performance*), and Toles (*A House Made of Light*). Such analysis considers the film to be of primary importance. This thesis aims to engage with films on their own terms; each chapter incorporates close analysis and criticism of selected examples. As explained earlier, the project also draws on theories of the everyday, however, I argue that such theory where employed helps illuminate the films and the way they orient us towards them, rather than forcing the films to fit a predetermined theoretical agenda.

I feel compelled here to respond to Martin Barker's outright rejection of any text-based approach that invokes a hypothetical spectator ("Watching Rape" 109). In situating his part in a research project collaboration with the British Board of Film Classification into audience responses to cinematic representations of sexual violence (including *Fat Girl*, *Fuck Me*, and *Irreversible* amongst others) Barker is quick to dismiss the place of any study that considers viewer experience without engaging with "real audiences":



*All real audiences come with prior knowledges, hopes, fears and expectations. They belong to communities (real, imagined and hoped-for), and have a sense of who they are and what they want from the encounter. Any research method that seeks to bypass these can take us nowhere helpful, and any method that seeks to derive some “necessary” response from textual characteristics achieves even less. (109)*

While I concede that the kind of focus group research that Barker’s study employs is invaluable, especially for the purposes of policy making that the BBFC is interested in, his wholesale dismissal of approaches other than his own is epistemologically cavalier. Such a position is further complicated by the clearly problematic notion of what constitutes “real audiences.” The study undertaken first analysed the debates occurring in relation to the chosen films on Internet websites, secondly it launched an online questionnaire regarding the films, and finally focus groups were conducted from a sample of respondents who agreed to discuss the films further. These focus groups, or “real audiences,” however, were deliberately constructed to contain only people “who had particularly positive responses” (108-9) to the films under the assumption that those who did not were “less engaged” (109).<sup>11</sup> While this is only the most glaring of a range of problems with the belief that focus group research into such a sensitive topic automatically equates to authentic data, I would like to clarify that my research makes no claims as to overarching or definitive responses from viewers. It is my belief that the films in this thesis intend to disturb viewers through particular and observable narrative and aesthetic strategies, not that every viewer will be disturbed by them. For this reason, my research will focus primarily on the films themselves, and surrounding theory. While affect is important in articulating what it might mean to be disturbed by film, and how this might happen, this thesis is primarily interested in the screen aesthetics that I argue are employed in attempting to evoke this kind of affect.

### **Defining disturbing affect**

So far this introduction has given an overview of the critical and theoretical terrain with which this project intersects in order to engage with, and make claims about a trend in contemporary European art cinema that I argue seeks to extend its aesthetic grip on us in troubling ways. While there is a long history of theorisation regarding how films might engage us—through character alignment, identification, and distanciation,<sup>12</sup> I do not think these models are best for articulating the present

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<sup>11</sup> Further elaboration on this decision is provided in the full report, “Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema” (Barker et al). In particular, see the section “Distinguishing ‘Embracers’ and ‘Refusers,’” (9-10).

<sup>12</sup> Theories about the way in which viewers engage with cinema texts are complex and multifarious. Influential approaches over the history of spectatorship theorisation have included screen theory, which examines dynamics of desire, pleasure, illusion and ideology often through the lens of psychoanalysis (See Baudry “Ideological Effects of the Basic Apparatus,” Metz *The Imaginary Signifier*, Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”); cognitive

issue. As will be shown throughout the following chapters, the aesthetic being described is not limited to character, structure, or mode of address, rather it spans all of these in complex ways. Returning to the beginning of this chapter, I want to consider the dynamic at work in all of the films in this thesis, one that entices us to draw meaning from sudden acts of violence, and then works to preclude us from doing so. This is a kind of pull/ push dynamic that I think is best established through the work of Martin Harries on destructive spectatorship, and Georges Bataille's writing on transgression and the formless.

In *Forgetting Lot's Wife*, Harries invokes the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah to consider "one of the dominant, but rarely directly articulated, fantasies of modern spectatorship," the core of which is "the threat of, or desire for, an experience of spectatorship so overwhelming that it destroys the spectator" (14-15). For Harries, Lot's wife, who is petrified for disobeying the angels' commandment and looking backward at the destroyed city of Sodom, becomes emblematic of the twentieth century's fascination with self-destructive retrospection (16). The allure Harries speaks of here concerns a modern imperative to look back at historical catastrophe. Tragic events like the Holocaust and September 11 promote a kind of traumatic reflection; looking back necessitates the contemplation of one's own annihilation (19). In the story of Lot's wife, Harries sees a model for "destructive spectatorship," that is, a way of approaching artworks that position the viewer in the masochistic contemplation of their own destruction:

Her story is a myth of the body's absolute responsiveness to historical catastrophe, at once legible as a sign of the body's submission to the spectacle it confronts, and, in the turn towards the cities, a gesture of the willingness to confront that spectacle, to look back when you know that looking back will destroy you. (21)

The masochism implied in destructive spectatorship shares some resonance with Bataille's earlier writing on transgression. I am drawing on Bataille's writing in conjunction with Harries, for both help to articulate the affective quality of the films under examination. Where Harries's thesis on destructive spectatorship discusses art that asks us to consider our own annihilation, and its capacity to destroy or damage the spectator, Bataille's writing helps illustrate a fundamental tension, and it is

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film theory, interested in the processes by which we might identify, or otherwise engage with on-screen characters via affective responses such as sympathy and empathy (See Bordwell *Narration in the Fiction Film* and *Making Meaning*, Plantinga and Smith *Passionate Views*, Carroll *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*); and reception studies which undertakes case studies of specific audiences, privileging contextual factors such as advertising, reviews, and focus group research as the locus of meaning making (See Altman *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, Barker et al "Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema," Staiger *Perverse Spectators*). For a more in depth overview or theoretical approaches to spectatorship see: Plantinga "Spectatorship," Coplan "Empathy and Character Engagement," and Wojcik "Spectatorship and Audience Research".

in the space that opens up between these two ideas that we can identify what is here termed a pull/push dynamic that is operational in the films under consideration. For Bataille, the desire to overcome one's individuality and the isolation of separateness is fundamental to human nature. As "discontinuous beings" we yearn for a sense of connection with the world, a kind of transcendence of the self, and yet the continuity we seek is simultaneously threatening for it means the loss of subjectivity and the dissolution of the individual. Consequently there is a tension between the desire for continuity, and the danger of self-annihilation:

Continuity is what we are after, but generally only if that continuity which the death of discontinuous beings can alone establish is not the victor in the long run. What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain. (Bataille *Erotism* 18-19)

For Bataille, this means disrupting the sense of isolation without giving over to death. While Bataille here describes such disruption coming in the form of lived experience—erotic activity, witnessing sacrifice and mystical encounters, for example—his ideas are also applicable to art. Furthermore, as Darren Jorgensen has argued, "Bataille did not distinguish the real from artifice, the movement of transgression from its representations in art and literature."

Bataille's related concept of the "formless" is one that is more commonly applied to artworks, including film, and continues this idea of tension between attraction and repulsion, the desire for transfiguration and the threat of negation. Hal Foster describes the formless as "a condition...where significant form dissolves because the fundamental distinction between figure and ground, self and other, is lost" (149). Martine Beugnet's study of the "cinema of sensation" draws on the formless to describe a body of French cinema where "what is at stake is the evocation, irretrievably enmeshed in the very texture of the images and sound, of those borderline states that reveal the inherent vulnerability of the self" (*Cinema and Sensation* 7). Beugnet describes a tension in these films "between the pleasures of sensuous communion and the terror of self-integrity decomposing" (68). Significantly, Beugnet is referring to an ambiguity produced in the materiality of images and sounds. For example Beugnet describes the synaesthetic affect produced by Philippe Grandrieux's use of a thermo camera towards the end of *A New Life/ La vie nouvelle* (2002); the bodies on-screen become amorphous and monstrous, losing their defining features:

eyeless, translucent silhouettes, part-human, part-animal, howling and hovering blindly in the dark...It is the pull of the formless in its terrifying, Bataillean horror that this evokes—a reminder of film's powerful capacity to conjure up and then annihilate the human figure by swallowing it back into the images' matter. (88)

The threat of annihilation is counterbalanced with the pull of transfiguration in a vertiginous tension. Lot's wife looks and is destroyed; Bataille's everyman longs to look, is always on the verge of looking. While Beugnet adopts Bataille's concept in order to discuss the textural qualities of her corpus, this project draws on the balance between desire and threat to elucidate a more general aesthetic tendency in the films examined.

These films invoke, in a variety of ways, a pull/ push dynamic that Bataille's writing helps to articulate. This pull/ push dynamic is a non-theoretically confining notion that characterises the affective experience of the films under scrutiny here. By employing this less theoretically mannered term, I want to illustrate a range of available responses under which the disturbing might be grasped effectively. While the kind of affect I seek to articulate is not hospitable to easy definition, I will attempt to sketch it crudely here. All of the films explored in this thesis utilise this pull/ push dynamic in order to give an uncommon and affecting sense of proximity to violence. Like Bataille's discussion of the lure of giving oneself over to continuity being in tension with the knowledge that doing so would mean annihilation of the self, the films examined here lure us in various ways into a close relationship with violent representation, only to push us away from a sense of clear purpose by which we might reconcile them. Whether subtle or explicit, this dynamic functions to open a disturbing gap between violence and meaning. The desire for continuity is in this context a desire for meaning and narrative closure. The explanation we seek is ultimately unattainable and yet rendered proximate to violent representation; our discontinuity or separateness from the film is troubled. It is not that disturbing cinema literally threatens to destroy the viewer, but its capacity to disturb the spectator signals a threat to self-integrity.

While this thesis will demonstrate that "disturbing" is an identifiable aesthetic and useful term, I do not mean to suggest that it is a predictable feature of the text. As a point of comparison I would like to draw on Andrew Goldstone's description of the "knight's move" as a literary device employed by Vladimir Nabokov. Serving as a metaphor for an evasive style, the knight in chess does not move in a straight line, but changes course and can skip over those in its way unlike any other piece. Goldstone refers to a recurring device in Nabokov's style strategically employed "to frustrate

your expectations, to leap over the apparently important events into something else characterized by a kind of aesthetic play.” This sense of play is crucial, because while often employed, the “knight’s move” is not a predictable mechanism but functions in a variety of ways. Similarly, where the pull/push dynamic creates a gap between violent representation and its significance, it is evinced across various aspects of the text (structure, mode of address, temporality etc.), and as is elucidated in detail in chapter four, is not a formulaic device guaranteeing disturbing affect.

## Structure

This thesis seeks firstly to situate the disturbing in European art cinema aesthetics in an historical context, identifying the significance of the everyday as an under-examined element, before considering the key ways in which violence and the everyday are combined to disturbing affect in a range of contemporary European films. In the first instance, I will make a case for the everyday as playing an important role in bridging past and contemporary examples of disturbing European cinema, before exploring the various ways the aforementioned pull/ push mechanism is recruited to preclude aesthetic closure through an intentional blocking of meaning in a number of contemporary European art films.

Chapter two seeks to unpack what we mean when we evoke a “new extremism” in European cinema, by considering the relationship between the new extreme and extreme works of the past. Taking up Horeck and Kendall’s claim that implicit in the notion of the extreme is a dynamic between newness and indebtedness to earlier works of transgression (5-6), chapter two seeks to reframe the way extreme cinema is approached by arguing that the everyday plays an important role in bridging past and present works of disturbing cinema. In order to do this, chapter two examines two key lines of continuity between the new extreme films and earlier examples of extremity in European cinema. The first of these is an observable tendency in criticism and scholarship to frame the affective quality of this cinema within a discourse of immediacy—the evocation of shock, outrage, and disgust. Teasing out distinction from a more pervasive and enduring kind of affect—the disturbing, the chapter then traces a second line of continuity, observable in the presence of a pull/ push dynamic, throwing the extreme and the everyday into tension. Examining this dynamic in two notorious examples of disturbing European cinema—*Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Pasolini 1975) and *Come and See* (Klimov 1985)—this chapter argues that the significance of moments of extremity in the generation of disturbing affect has been overemphasised, and calls for an approach attentive to the ordinary as well as the exceptional. While not drawing on the everyday primarily as

the source of disturbing affect, I argue that these films draw on the everyday in moments remarkable for their very presence amidst otherwise extraordinary narratives.

Where the films explored in chapter two feature discrete but significant moments in which the everyday intrudes upon the extreme to complicate the connection between violence and meaning, chapter three turns to more contemporary instances of disturbing cinema in which this dynamic is inverted. Chapter three examines two films that privilege the everyday over moments of violence—the tension between the extreme and the everyday appearing as an aspect of film style. *Money* (Bresson 1983) and *The Seventh Continent* (Haneke 1989) employ a mode of representation that maintains an even tenor between articulations of the uneventful and moments of violence creating a disparity between the “drama” of what is being presented and the seeming refusal of the aesthetics to acknowledge it. This paring back of film style works to refuse guidance as to how to spectators should interpret violence, and is further combined with a tendency to involve viewers in hermeneutic problems that cannot be adequately solved. In this way the films preclude attempts to tether meaning to violent acts, denying the clarity of a reassuring explanation. Engaging with key theories of everyday film style as a formal aesthetic of de-dramatisation capable of revealing profundity, chapter three considers the shortcomings of prior scholarship’s rigid alignment of everyday style with positive conceptions of the quotidian. In this chapter, I suggest an alternate approach that allows for consideration of other conceptions of the everyday as negative or indeterminate.

Chapter four expands this tendency to refuse guidance in relation to depictions of violence. Where the films in chapter three stylistically equate moments of extreme violence with the banal, chapter four considers films in which the intrusion of violence into the everyday is marked as a definite rupture. Catherine Breillat’s *Fat Girl* and Bruno Dumont’s *Twenty-nine Palms* establish familiar patterns and worlds only to break them with paroxysms of violence in their final minutes. Disoriented by these seemingly illegible shifts, critical and scholarly responses tend to interpret them in terms of a shift in genre, or dismiss them as an authorial misstep. Unpacking these responses, and considering issues of authorship, genre, and aesthetics, I argue that it is the films’ broader orienting structures that pave the way for disturbing affect. Drawing on the scholarship of George Wilson and Deborah Thomas, this chapter considers the ways in which Breillat and Dumont’s films involve us in ways that go “beyond genre” (*Beyond Genre* 9), establishing what I call proximate and alienating structures congruent with the theoretical distinctions between positive and negative conceptions of the everyday. This chapter explores the way in which, despite their

ostensibly similar structures, *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* vary greatly in their modes of address, proving integral to their respective capacity for disturbing affect.

In contrast to the films examined in chapters two to four, which tend to culminate in events of violence, and end abruptly thereafter, chapter five turns to films which draw attention to the endurance of the everyday, and the persistence of violence within it. Gaspar Noé's *I Stand Alone* and Markus Schleizer's *Michael* offer insight into what a return to the everyday following violent disruption might look like. What is potentially most troubling about these films is their implication that violence and the everyday are perhaps not mutually exclusive. In varying ways, both films depict violence as something that might be absorbed into the very fabric of the ordinary. Drawing on theoretical conceptions of everyday time as both measured and perpetual, eventful and repetitious, this chapter argues that these films frustrate our desire for coherence by making explicit the fallacy of the narratives we construct to make the everyday meaningful. I argue that by undermining our attempts to understand on-screen violence with legible meaning, these films extend their potency by calling attention to the meaning we project on life outside the cinema; *I Stand Alone* and *Michael* challenge us to question just what is at stake in acknowledging the everyday as indeterminate.

## Chapter Two

### Everyday Moments

*Come and See/ Idi i smotri* (Klimov, 1985), *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom/ Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (Pasolini, 1975)

### Introduction

When Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom*—an updated adaptation of de Sade's literary masterwork of torture and degradation—screened at the New York Film Festival in 1977, Vincent Canby was unimpressed. For Canby, Pasolini's relocation of the novel's characters from their 18<sup>th</sup> Century castle in Southern Germany to the fall of the Mussolini regime was an intellectual and political statement that works “on paper,” but cannot be realised on screen with the same theoretical distance. Writing for *The New York Times*, Canby states:

For all of Mr. Pasolini's desire to make “Salo” an abstract statement, one cannot look at the images of people being scalped, whipped, gouged, slashed, covered with excrement and sometimes eating it and react abstractly unless one shares the director's obsessions. Far from being the “agonized scream of total despair” the New York Film Festival calls the film, it is a demonstration of nearly absolute impotency, if there is such a thing. Ideas get lost in a spectacle of such immediate reality and cruelty. (“‘Salo’ is Disturbing” 11)

A week later, Canby continued his attack in another article, comparing the film's simulated perversions to the “simulated...intelligence that attempts to justify this sort of sensational (sometimes vomit-inducing) imagery as a political statement” (“Seen Any ‘Accessible’ Movies Lately?” 32). And just one year earlier, Canby had published a more general lamentation at the state of excessive violence in cinema both at home and abroad in an article entitled “Explicit Violence Overwhelms Every Other Value on Screen.” In this piece (written before Canby had seen *Salò*) Pasolini's “attempt to make political point out of scenes of systematized rape, castration and other forms of amputation, disembowelment, defecation, and such” only warrants one sentence amidst a catalogue of grizzly moments in then recent films including *Taxi Driver* (Scorcese 1976), *In The Realm of the Senses* (Oshima 1976) and *The Last Woman* (Ferreri 1976) amongst several others. While Canby finds the violence of Schlesinger's *Marathon Man* (1976) acceptable for what he regards to be the film's greater artistry, he laments:



Yet in more and more films like “Scorchy” and “Drum” and “Lipstick”—movies made without any art and with no purpose except to shock—violence of the graphic sort that is now possible becomes the point of the movie, instead of a means to some other end. This is what separates today’s violent films from those of earlier decades (the 1930’s gangster films) that were in their own times thought to have gone too far. (69)

Readers familiar with James Quandt’s scathing attack on extremes in French cinema almost three decades later will already recognise the similar rhetorical stance. His seminal article “Flesh and Blood, Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema” would almost echo Canby’s criticism, this time directed at Bruno Dumont’s explicit *Twentynine Palms* (2003):

Asked why he set out to disturb his audience in *Twentynine Palms*, Dumont responded: “Because people are too set in their ways, they are asleep. They have to be woken up.... You can never definitely say you are human, you have to regularly be confronted by something, to remind you that you still have a lot to do as a human being, you have to be awakened.” Awakened, though, to what? What new or important truth does Dumont proffer that his audience needs to be slapped and slammed out of its sleepwalk into apprehending? In his sophistry, Dumont may place himself in the tradition of provocation, from Sade to Rimbaud to Pasolini, but *Twentynine Palms* has none of the power to shock an audience into consciousness evident in the elliptic violence of Bresson’s *L’Argent*, the emotional evisceration of Eustache’s *The Mother and the Whore*, or the bitter sexuality of Pialat’s *A nos amours*. (24)

Finally, lamenting Dumont’s film as just one in a large spate of shocking but ultimately vacuous French films, Quandt concludes:

The authentic, liberating outrage—political, social, sexual—that fuelled such apocalyptic visions as *Salò* and *Weekend* now seems impossible, replaced by an aggressiveness that is really a grandiose form of passivity. (25)

There are a few points of overlap between Canby and Quandt’s responses to contemporary examples of boundary pushing violence on screen that are worth noting. First is the sense in which both authors find that the immediacy of the violence overwhelms the viewer so that any intended meaning is lost. While acknowledging authorial intention in the employment of graphic violence, Canby and Quandt are both at pains to highlight the respective films’ perceived failure in expression of meaning. Second, there is an eagerness to dismiss the new as excessive and separate from earlier, more purposeful examples of violent representation. Whereas for Canby, Pasolini’s film effects something very close to “absolute impotency”—part of a greater trend in cinema which unlike its predecessors privileges violence over meaning—for Quandt, the very same object is

regarded as the bastion of genuine political subversion from a long gone era. Rather it is the *new* new extreme that, in its lack of perceived purpose, equates to a “grandiose form of passivity.”

The enduring power of films like *Salò* to unsettle suggests that beyond the immediate reactions extreme cinema provokes, is the potential for both the accrual of meaning over time, and a more pervasive, enduring kind of affect. This affective dynamic would seem to be implicit in the notion of the extreme itself. As Horeck and Kendall argue (drawing on Frances Ferguson’s study of pornography), the very concept of the extreme necessarily involves an element of novelty (5), and yet, it is not a fixed category, for what is considered extreme is endlessly being renewed. However, where Ferguson considers this constant regeneration of what is deemed pornographic to efface the power of its predecessors,<sup>13</sup> for Horeck and Kendall, new extremes in cinema balance this sense of progressive newness with an historical indebtedness. While they invoke Quandt’s term, Horeck and Kendall do not mean to suggest that the new extremism is unprecedented, rather they argue that the term new extreme cinema signals a “bridging position between newness and indebtedness to the past, to a history of transgression and provocation that is renewed and given a visceral immediacy for the present” (5-6).

This notion of a “bridging position” between new and past, immediacy and longevity, is useful in articulating the aims of this chapter. While for Horeck and Kendall the focus is on the visceral immediacy of extremes, this chapter seeks to reframe the way we might approach the affective potential of these works by considering the role of the everyday in bridging past and contemporary examples of disturbing cinema. In order to do this, this chapter first outlines what I call a “discourse of immediacy,” that is, the prevalence of a discourse that locates the affective potential of extreme cinema within the immediacy of shock, outrage and disgust, before teasing out what I take to be an equally important strand of more lasting affect—the disturbing. Further, this chapter argues that what remains in many new extreme films as a degree of continuity with extreme films of the past is the central affective dynamic—the pull/ push mechanism facilitated by throwing the everyday and extreme into tension. Despite both pre-dating the new extremism and being ostensibly divorced from any sense of the ordinary, this chapter argues that two notoriously disturbing films—Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and Elem Klimov’s *Come and See* (1985) both draw upon the everyday for their disturbing affect. Further, because both films are firmly

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<sup>13</sup> For Ferguson, the power of pornography is dependent on its sense of newness: “To feel the force of the pornographic as pornographic is to feel as though one is in its world, not merely viewing it...If it doesn’t feel contemporaneous, it isn’t pornography. Pornography brooks no stance involving historical distance” (152).

located within times of war and trauma (unlike the more recent examples of disturbing cinema explored in the remainder of this thesis), their gestures towards the ordinary are all the more remarkable in their seeming incongruence given the sort of worlds they depict. In articulating the everyday as a factor in bridging past and present extremes, it is not my intention to suggest that this connection is seamless. Rather I mean to investigate the role of the everyday as a significant point of continuity, as a means of exploring the relationship between the extreme as something that is both indebted to a history of transgression, and something that is necessarily revived.

### **Discourse of immediacy**

The previous chapter noted the centrality of response to the defining of the new extremism, the uncomfortable breaching of boundaries between film and viewer, and the emphasis in commentary to highlight incidences of audience unrest such as mass walkouts. As Horeck and Kendall state, beyond challenging content, “it is first and foremost the uncompromising and highly self-reflexive appeal to the spectator that marks out the specificity of these films” (1). It is hardly surprising then, that these films tend to be framed in popular criticism and scholarship alike, in terms of their affective potential to shock and confront. This is most obvious in press coverage of the films; Quandt’s employment of terms like “slapped” and “slammed” to describe a film’s address to spectators is not unusual. Reviews of new extreme cinema, both negative and positive, frequently describe a film’s address in terms of physical assault. For example, in his review for *Time of the Wolf/ Le temps du loup* (2003) Peter Bradshaw describes Haneke’s cinema as “wound-searchingly, bone-scrapingly real: extreme cinema without anaesthetic” (“*Time of the Wolf*”). Similarly, Angelique Chrisafis’s defence of Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* for *The Guardian* describes the confronting nature of the film in corporeal terms:

Vomit trickled up into my mouth about four minutes into watching Alex anally raped on a piss-coated subway floor... You feel—from her face and his contortions—the organs ripping, leaking across the floor... I felt my unknown neighbours in the cinema seats beside me knarling [sic] their tongues, twisting in their chairs, desperate to leave, but desperate to carry on with the film. (“Why Should We” A8).

Later in the same piece, she summarises:

As a viewing experience, it was like being grabbed by the hair and having your face forced fast into a bowl of freezing water, while you sat there unable to breath, [sic] limbs flailing, attempting to cover your face. (A8)

Chrisafis's description is one of multisensory assault, her language evocative not only of her own sense of violation, but the perceptible unease of those around her. Her vocabulary absorbs the visceral immediacy of the on-screen assault, with its ripping, leaking, gnarling, twisting, grabbing, forcing, and flailing, suggesting both the aggressive stance of the artwork toward the spectator, and a distressing lack of distance between the two. Notably, the terms used to illustrate the affective response of Chrisafis and those around her almost exclusively connote suddenness. These adjectives point not to a pervasive sense of discomfort, but a forceful and urgent jolt to one's experience.

This tendency in response to representations of extreme violence in film is nothing new however. Elza Adamowicz describes the "rhetorical excesses" common in the positive reception of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's collaboration *An Andalusian Dog/ Un chien Andalou* (1929). The Surrealist short film, notorious for its opening moments in which a woman's eye is suddenly sliced open with a straight razor, prompted several critics to respond in a capricious style, their vocabulary seemingly absorbed from the film (18). I have already in the previous chapter mentioned Charles Barr's scrupulous reading of the vitriolic response of British critics to *Straw Dogs* in 1971. However, as Barr observes, Peckinpah's film, "is only one of a line of more or less distinguished films whose violent or gruesome elements have produced an overall critical response which can be termed hysterical" (26). The following decade saw widespread moral panic surrounding the "video nasties" in Britain—a list of violent films the Director of Public Prosecutions suspected to be in breach of obscenity laws ("Video Nasties" 352). Martin Barker describes the reactionary press coverage as "pure adjectival horror" (qtd. in Petley 351).

The rhetoric employed in criticism to describe the affective quality of the new extreme films, and indeed a long history of violent cinema, is concerned with capturing one's immediate reaction. The recurrent allusion to assault pertains to a physical and cognitive involvement that is characterised by a sense of temporal urgency. While this discourse of immediacy is common, at times critics' responses also refer to a sense of discomfort that lingers beyond the immediate shock of extreme moments. Roger Ebert's account of his experience watching Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) is indicative, noting the tension between moments of extremity and a more subtle and enduring feeling

of unease. Ebert's first account of the film described the audience experience at the Cannes premiere.

Von Trier's film goes beyond malevolence into the monstrous... We looked in disbelief. There were piteous groans. Sometimes a voice would cry out, "No!" At certain moments there was nervous laughter. When it was all over, we staggered up the aisles. ("Cannes #5")

Coming to grips with his response a few days later, Ebert asserts, "Enough time has passed since I saw the film for me to process my visceral reaction, and take a few steps back." Referring to *Antichrist*'s moments of jolting violence, he states: "Its images are a fork in the eye," and yet, Ebert admits, it is a film that "will not leave me alone" ("Cannes #6").

Andrew O'Hehir's review of Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001) for *Salon* is similarly balanced between a description of the immediate sense of visceral horror afforded by the film and a more nuanced and enduring kind of unease:

Watching "Trouble Every Day," at least if you don't know what's coming, is like biting into what looks like a juicy, delicious plum on a hot summer day and coming away with your mouth full of rotten pulp and living worms... As you can probably tell, I haven't made up my mind about "Trouble Every Day." It's the kind of movie that stays in your head a long time, nibbling at your cerebral cortex.

Ebert and O'Hehir's experiences are closer approximations of the kind of affect this thesis attempts to grasp. While for the most part, discourse surrounding the new extreme films privileges the undeniable abrupt shock of (often unexpected) moments of graphic violence, in employing the term "disturbing," I am really trying to capture the crucial tension between the immediate, shocking and eventful, and its aftermath.

Moreover, the tendency to privilege a sense of immediacy when accounting for the new extreme's affective qualities is not relegated to popular criticism, but has also been a point of emphasis in scholarship. Grønstad's study of "the unwatchable" for example, invokes the notorious moment from *An Andalusian Dog*, describing the confronting nature of new extreme films as metaphorically performing "razorblade gestures" (*Screening* 6). With this term he refers to instances of provocation

pertaining to “the emotional, psychic, and ethical slicing open of the gaze of the spectator” (6). Concerned primarily with moments of rupture, Grønstad’s research finds the locus of the unwatchable’s affect in the transgressive gesture whereby “the image invites its own rejection” (*Screening* 163). This is the moment in which “we twitch, avert our eyes, or become nauseous” (163).

Similarly, both Martine Beugnet and Michael Goddard note that boundary pushing excess plays a role in the political charge of the new extreme. In “The Wounded Screen,” Beugnet discusses the “sensory overload” elicited by the new French extremity and the importance of excess to this cinema’s commentary upon French political history and trauma (31). For Beugnet, it is the visceral surplus of the films that prevents them from being neatly condensed into straight metaphorical readings, while also offering a “more visceral connection to the historical context of production” (31). Goddard likewise attributes the subversive potential of new extreme works such as Phillipe Grandrieux’s *A New Life* and Ulrich Seidl’s *Import/ Export* to “their resort to violence, monstrosity and extreme sensations” (“Eastern Extreme” 83). While these films have been criticised for promulgating exploitative stereotypes of Eastern Europe as primitive and other, Goddard argues that the films offer a radical commentary on the East/ West dynamic “not by avoiding clichés about Eastern European monstrosity but by pushing them to a higher level of intensity” (82).

In highlighting this tendency towards a discourse of immediacy in both critical and scholarly accounts of the affective potential of new extreme cinema, it is not my intention to diminish their value. Rather I mean to point out that the emphasis on moments of sudden rupture as the locus of affect is a significant point of continuity in the way extremes in violent cinema have been framed over time. If Horeck and Kendall’s project looks at the bridge between new and past transgression in terms of visceral immediacy, the remainder of this chapter calls for an approach that might help us get closer to bridging the past and contemporary in terms of a more enduring affect. This is not to negate the importance of the extreme; instead, I argue that the longevity of disturbing affect is intimately linked to the immediate and eventful—evinced in the relationship between the extreme and the ordinary which are thrown into tension. We might think of it as a distinction between the suddenness of the “lapel grabbing kineticism” that Romney evokes (“Le Sex and Violence”), and the more insidious sustained affect signalled by O’Hehir of the film “nibbling at your cerebral cortex.”

## Towards the ordinary

This chapter has just outlined what I take to be the first of two lines of continuity between the contemporary extremes in European cinema, and their predecessors. I now want to move to consider the second line, pertaining to what was established in the first chapter as the central affective dynamic at play in disturbing cinema. This is the pull/ push dynamic whereby the everyday and the extreme are brought into tension in such a way as to render us proximate to violent representation, before undermining attempts to adequately attribute the meaning that would make it legible. I argue that it is through this dynamic that the films covered in this thesis gesture to something beyond themselves, circumventing attempts at hermeneutic closure and thus compromising our separateness from the film. Part of my desire to reframe the way the new extremism has been approached—to interrogate the role its extremeness has to play in generating disturbing affect—comes from what I take to be a kinship between the kind of meaning-blocking manoeuvres employed in many of the new extreme films, their predecessors, and indeed a much broader history of art. While this thesis focuses primarily on the way this pull/ push dynamic can be observed in examples of European cinema, this is not to say that it is a cinematic trend alone. Before moving on to examine the continuity of this dynamic in the pre-new extreme films *Salò* and *Come and See*, I will draw on Martin Harries's analysis of Ozario Gentileschi's painting *Lot and His Daughters*, (see fig. 1) as illustrative of the kind of dynamic that is at work in these films.



Fig. 1. Ozario Gentileschi *Lot and His Daughters*

Gentileschi's image is overtly expressive of the sense in which an artwork might gesture beyond itself. The painting depicts a Biblical scene after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; an

intoxicated Lot rests his head in the lap of one of his daughters, whose outstretched arm points to something out of frame. Heeding this gesture, his other daughter too, stares into the distance. As Harries asserts, the daughters' look references their mother's forbidden gaze, "...Gentileschi frames the scene with this prohibition in mind: the painting is at once alluring and built around the deliberate frustration of the spectator's sight" (Harries 10). Further, Harries argues the image is marked by "a pointed absence the spectator must try and must always fail to recover" (11). As Harries states of Gentileschi's work: "The daughter's gesture is a sort of imperative, but the painting's central device makes it impossible for any spectator to obey this imperative" (11).

The pointed absence of the spectacle that Lot's daughters signal towards, provides a useful analogy for the way in which the pull/ push dynamic manifests in the films examined in this chapter. Both Pasolini's *Salò* and Klimov's *Come and See* foreground the damaging potential in looking at traumatic spectacle. Indeed, in the crucial moments where the everyday does impinge on the extreme, both films play with the distinction between seeing and not seeing.

Notably, unlike more recent examples of disturbing cinema, both Pasolini and Klimov's films are preoccupied with the exceptional. Both are set in times of political extremism: *Salò* in the final days of Italian facism, *Come and See* in Nazi-occupied Byelorussia. While the worlds they depict seem antithetical to any sense of banality or ordinariness—*Salò*'s *mise-en-scène* amounts to some kind of artistic otherworld, *Come and See*'s constant catalogue of horrific spectacle never fails to remind us just how hellish its characters' existence has become—I argue that in their more muted (and often overlooked) moments, these films do cast the everyday in tension with the extreme in such a way as to unsettle attempts to secure meaning to violence. This is not to suggest that these films involve us in precisely the same way as more recent examples of disturbing cinema examined in the remainder of this thesis; *Salò* and *Come and See* do not draw centrally on the everyday as the source of their affective power. However, it is for this reason that the momentary encroachment of the ordinary into these films is all the more remarkable. In an extension of the already well-documented visceral horror of these films, I am interested in exploring their potential for a more lasting kind of affect, namely the disturbing. In comparing the likes of *Salò* and *Come and See* with the more contemporary films in the chapters that follow, I argue that, like moments of extremity, the role of the everyday is an important element in bridging past and present examples of disturbing cinema.



## *Salò*

And it came to pass, when they had brought them forth abroad, that he said, Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed... Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. (*The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Gen. 19.17-26)

It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*. (Arendt *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 252)

Released in the mid 1970s, *Salò* remains a notorious example of cinematic provocation and is still regarded as one of the most disturbing films of all time. Adapted from Sade's bloodthirsty manuscript of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Pasolini's adaptation modernises the scenario, transporting the four libertine protagonists and their adolescent victims to the final days of Mussolini's Italy. The film plays out like the grimmest of fairy tales. The Duke, The President, The Bishop and The Magistrate stage a perverse theatre, having captured the surrounding countryside's finest boys and girls and spirited them away to a remote palace. Four of the boys are designated soldiers, another four appear to be the libertines' dedicated sex abettors and the remaining boys and girls form a mostly nondescript group of victims. The libertines' daughters become servants, and four more women are employed, three of whom will recount erotic stories whilst the other accompanies their narration on the piano. The narrative is divided into four chapters "Antechamber of hell," "Circle of obsessions," "Circle of shit," and "Circle of blood," each chapter escalating the perversions and violence on screen.

Since its initial release, *Salò* has been contentious, subject to bans across the globe. Ina Lee Selden, writing for *The New York Times*, describes the film's controversial history: seized instantly when shown in Milan in 1976, *Salò* was reproached by censors for its "aberrant and repugnant sexual perversion" (11). Judy Klemesrud, of the same newspaper, noted the audience response upon its screening at the New York Film Festival: "At the Sunday night screening, gagging noises from spectators were heard during some of the scenes, and about two dozen members of the largely male audience walked out" ("Film Festival's Fare" 43). Reviewing for *The Guardian*, Derek Malcolm acknowledges the film's provocation while praising its artistry: "every single passage in this long and perfectly structured and decorated film attacks our sensibilities until they are broken off and

crushed. The film even denies pessimism, since that after all is some kind of feeling” (“Pasolini’s Awful Masterpiece” 10). For Malcolm, *Salò* is a film in which “no defense mechanisms are allowed” (10). In London, there are reports of the film being confiscated from the Compton Cinema Club by members of the Obscene Publications Squad, who then took to interviewing audience members (Jongh “Distributors of Pasolini Film” 20). More recently, Lisa Coulthard asserts that *Salò* is “without a doubt the most obscene film ever created” (“Interrogating the Obscene” 183). Still controversial in 2009 (34 years after its release), David Church analysed the cultural reception of *Salò* as a “sick film” in online discussion boards, noting that the film is consistently high on fan lists of “sickest/most extreme/most brutal” films (342-3).

There is no question as to *Salò*’s transgressive representation. The film’s young characters are raped, forced to eat excrement, physically and psychologically tortured, and finally murdered. It is unsurprising then that the film’s affect is predominately described in terms of shock and revulsion. While any discussion of the film would be incomplete without considering these aspects, I would like to also turn attention to the often overlooked significance of *Salò*’s more muted moments. Though Pasolini’s film is far removed from any sense of ordinariness (the youngsters are literally wrenched from the everyday in the film’s opening), this is not to say that there are no ordinary moments within it. I wish to demonstrate that while the film’s graphic elements are undoubtedly confronting, it is these moments in which the everyday encroaches upon the extreme that prove integral to the film’s disturbing quality. That is, *Salò*’s capacity to gesture beyond itself is, in part, attributable to the tension between its understated moments and its scenes of brutality. For this reason, I argue that Pasolini’s *Salò* forms a significant precursor to a disturbing potential that becomes far more prevalent in the films explored in the remainder of this thesis.

In order to grasp *Salò*’s capacity for disturbing affect, it is necessary to discern the ways in which the film throws the extreme and the everyday into tension in such a way as to divorce meaning from violence. In *Salò*, this dynamic is intimately connected to the film’s obsession with vision, and the way our relationship to the film is shaped through a mode of address that is at once fascinated by violent spectacle, but also strategic in its withholding of that display. The following analysis explores the way Pasolini’s film addresses its spectators, before considering what I take to be key moments in the film’s conclusion in which the banal is set in tension with the extreme.

From the outset, *Salò* makes the thematic concern with appearance and vision clear. In the opening scenes fascist officers comb the landscape for the ideal objects for the libertines' lubricious fancies. Escorted to the palace, the victims are stripped naked and auditioned before their captors. The libertines inspect the boys and girls, highlighting their qualities and deformities as one shops for fruit. One such audition is abruptly halted when the female victim smiles to reveal the imperfection of a missing tooth.

Pasolini's *mise-en-scène* emphasises the obsession with appearance further. The room we become most familiar with, "the Orgy room," is a massive space serving as both stage and auditorium for the madams' storytelling. The grandiosity of this room is accentuated in wide shots which form highly choreographed images, conscious of their own fabrication and beauty. Boys and girls litter the outskirts of the frame in four distinct areas governed by their respective masters, exquisitely posed in arrangements more reminiscent of tableau vivant painting than film (see figs. 2-3). Spectatorship is internalised; much of the film is spent watching the characters watching, as the three madams in turn recount tales that progress from traditional eroticism to grotesque and murderous perversion.

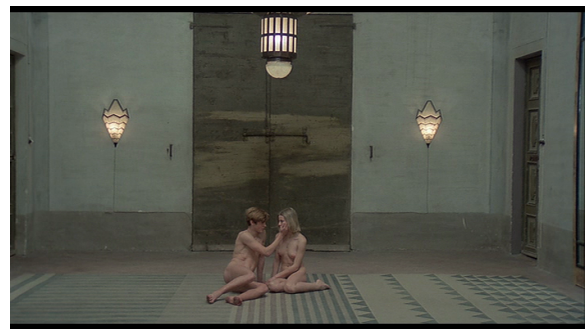
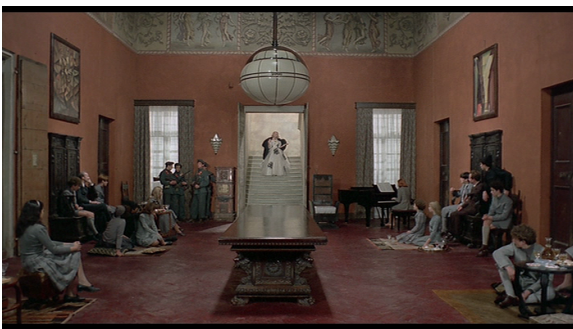


Fig. 2 – 3: Tableau framing in *Salò*

*Salò*'s emphasis on vision also impacts on our understanding of character. The menace of the libertines is attributed to their appearance rather than to any fleshing out of personality. As Gary Indiana notes, only the Duke is played by a professional actor, while the other dignitaries are defined less by their performance than by their physiognomy (48-9). E. M. Forster's division of fictional characters<sup>14</sup> into flat or round is useful here. Forster defines flat characters as "types" (46) or "caricatures...constructed round a single idea or quality" (47), and round characters as those that

<sup>14</sup> Though describing characters of novels, Forster's principle translates to film characters.

are “capable of surprising in a convincing way” (54). *Salò*’s protagonists are without depth, Pasolini rendering them less as individuals than as four tentacles of the same monster. The victims are treated with a similar level of indifference. Indiana argues that this opacity of character functions to distance the spectator from potential identification:

Every scene is a kind of crowd scene, the whole cast is almost always present, there are no dramatic “developments” between monadic protagonists, but rather a generalised, malignant energy field generated between oppressors and victims; the little threads of characterological continuity add up to nothing resembling a series of subplots; the victims are at one minute like children playing a game without a clue to its meaning, at another brutalised, but they remain, in either case, merely “bodies in space.” (69)

Robert Gordon also argues that the film isolates the viewer from identifying with *Salò*’s characters. Despite being offered a wealth of characters on-screen, all audience to the theatrics of the Orgy room, the viewer’s look does not equate to theirs, that is, we do not share their point of view. In Pasolini’s cinema, Gordon argues, the viewer is “a subject in crisis...a subject dislocated and in suspension, looking for an anchor in reality or in a vision of subjective plenitude” (262).

The role of the pianist is worth considering as both a possible (albeit ambiguous) source of identification, but more importantly because I take her presence in the final sequence of the film to be crucial to the film’s potential for disturbing affect. Despite being a relatively minor character, the pianist has been noted by Colleen Ryan-Scheutz as a kind of enigmatic Other in the narrative. Seemingly employed by the libertines to accompany the madams’ stories with music, she is in this sense complicit with their actions and yet is separated both physically (for the most part she occupies a corner of the room faced away from the action) and emotionally (she is the only one of those in a privileged position who ever shows any compassion for the victims) (Ryan-Scheutz 206). Her dialogue is limited, and so our insight as to her allegiance (either with the libertines or with their victims) can only be speculated. Where the madams take pleasure in active involvement in the libertine’s regime, the pianist’s role is more ambiguous. Her point of difference is alluded to in a storytelling scene where Signora Vaccari recounts a tale of matricide. Renata, a female victim whose mother was killed trying to prevent her capture, cries out in anguish. Arousing the Duke’s curiosity and prompting antagonism from Vaccari, Renata’s pain is met with a close up of the pianist as she stops her music and looks on sympathetically. One might argue her otherness as a potential point of identification for viewers, and yet this is not without complication. Indiana also

remarks on the pianist's curious position within the film noting these abrupt halts in her playing as a significant motif. These pauses "sometimes followed by a shot of Saviange turning away from her keyboard to stare wordlessly at some especially nasty event behind her" are problematised, however, as "not everything the pianist reacts to in this way is extreme or objectionable" (Indiana 61).

Whatever her currency as a potential role of identification, her curious presence in the film's final moments warrants close consideration. Indeed her presence here instigates the film's opening of a gap between violence and meaning, the encroaching of the everyday into the extreme. The horrors we have witnessed in the film thus far now culminate with unprecedented explicitness as the remaining victims are tortured and killed. And yet, amidst the most graphic representations of violence in the entire film, Pasolini inserts an oddly unassuming moment that is rendered strange by its very ordinariness. I want to unpack this sequence in some detail as it is both where the violence reaches its climax, and where the subdued and ordinary encroach, problematising attempts to secure meaning.

In a very rare instance, *Salò*'s final scenes depict events taking place outdoors. From an elevated position inside, libertines take turns to look out into a courtyard where the remaining victims are held naked and captive to be scalped, blinded, branded, raped, hanged and dismembered. The nature of witnessing is brought to the forefront here: as the dignitaries sit smiling and staring through binoculars down at the atrocities below, we are given their point of view. In this sense, the violence they witness is simultaneously seen and not seen; torture is rendered highly visible by the magnification of the binoculars, but it is also highly mediated and aestheticised. The distance between subject and object is emphasised in a clear disjunction between sound and vision; though we see the captives screaming in agony below, we are removed enough to not hear their cries. For Bondanella this disparity transforms "the static tableaux and the suffering human beings they contain into abstract objects for aesthetic contemplation" (429).

Mediated and aestheticised though it might be, the violence in this sequence is hard to bear. In close up (through the binocular view) we see a boy's tongue cut from his mouth, another's eye is plucked from its socket with a knife, genitals and other body parts are burned with hot pokers and candle

flames, and a young woman is scalped. It is worth noting that while Canby, amongst other critics,<sup>15</sup> struggled to reconcile the graphic content with Pasolini's intended message, these moments are not ambiguous. In the very first scene, the libertines meet to sign an agreement, concluding when the Bishop rests his hand on a notebook marked "Regulations," stating: "All's good if it's excessive." In keeping with Sade's work, Pasolini also includes passages in which the libertines' expound their ideology; over dinner, of a drunken evening, and just in general conversation, they wax philosophical about the nature of power and evil with reference to Baudelaire and Nietzsche. The bloodshed in the film's climax forms the logical end point of the libertine's pursuit of excess. Amidst the horror of this final sequence, however, is an oddly undramatic, but significant moment.

This focuses on the pianist (whom we have all but forgotten about by this point) as alone in the Orgy room, she abruptly ceases playing her piano and rises. Already dwarfed by the magnitude of the room, her slow walk from one side to the other to leave it emphasises her diminutive figure further. Walking upstairs and through two vacant bedrooms she opens a window. Ryan-Scheutz describes her movement "as if looking for signs of life" (208). This description feels inaccurate, however, for not once does the pianist pause or turn her gaze to investigate the rooms she passes through. Instead, she walks expressionless to her destination as though drawn there with a quietude that feels disconcertingly pre-ordained. What might easily be an ordinary moment, a character walking from one part of the palace to another, or actively searching for its inhabitants, feels strangely off-kilter. She climbs a chair to sit on the windowsill looking downwards. Her expressionless countenance turns suddenly to shock and gasping, her hand rises to her mouth (see fig. 4). Curiously, we are not granted her perspective. Instead, we cut to a wide shot looking in from the next room, the narrow frame of the doorway bordering the narrow frame of the window, as the pianist climbs awkwardly in her high heels to jump to her death.

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<sup>15</sup> Joy Gould Boyum of the *Wall Street Journal*, for example, describes feelings conflicted in how to offer critical commentary on *Salò*: "How in the face of the kind of active repugnance this work is capable of arousing can he [the critic] maintain even the pretense of objectivity?" Acknowledging that dismissing the film on the grounds of revulsion is to fail to offer meaningful consideration, Boyum notes the way in which the film's serious intentions are overwhelmed by its involvement of viewers in its extremity: "Still, if the film cannot be dismissed simply as pornographic or revolting, it can be faulted on other grounds. It fails to sustain the distance necessary for an aesthetic experience. Squeamish or not, a critic has to believe that his responses will hold true for others, that if he finds the content of a film like 'Salò' too overwhelming, its assault too direct to make aesthetic contemplation possible, so will other viewers." ("How Far Can Art Go?" 15)



Fig. 4. Gesturing beyond the frame—the pianist’s unrequited gaze in *Salò*

The pianist’s suicide is rendered undramatically with a composed matter-of-factness in contrast to the aesthetic pretension of the torture scenes outdoors. The viewing dynamic has not changed—we are still watching a character watching. However, in contrast to the shots of the libertines viewing the horror below, our perspective is not aligned with the pianist’s. Like Lot’s wife’s forbidden gaze, the pianist’s downward glance is obliterating, but similarly, like the dynamic effected in Gentileschi’s painting, our vision in this instance is frustrated. The pianist’s response implores us to look, but our look is denied. There can be no doubt that her suicide is a response to some horrible sight, but it is a sight to which the audience is not privy, somewhat bizarrely in the midst of this film that does not shy away from horrific spectacles. The gap opened by the withholding of her subjective shot is significantly incongruous with the obsessive emphasis on the libertines’ perspectives that bookend this moment, and indeed we return, after her death, to the libertines’ exploits in the courtyard with unprecedented explicitness. The refusal of a reverse shot here is itself a way of refusing clarity. While we can speculate as to what she sees, there is no defining image to anchor the pianist’s gaze, and so meaning cannot be secured.

The analogy I draw between Gentileschi’s painting and the unrequited gaze of the pianist might seem to be undermined by the moment’s bookending between graphic scenes of torture. Where Lot’s daughter’s gesture implores us to look at something restricted by the frame, an appeal that cannot be met, it is possible that we have already been granted access to a sense of the pianist’s vision through the libertine’s binoculars. If we assume that the pianist is looking at the same tortures we have already seen, as might be implied by the scene’s placement, perhaps there is simply no need for a reverse shot here. This argument is problematic for two reasons, however. First, even if we could be sure the pianist does look to the courtyard, her look is only momentary, and so the specificity of what she sees remains undefined; the viewer is still left with the impossible

task of filling the gap. Second, it is *her* look—a gaze not aestheticised by binoculars—that we do not see. Just as Harries points out that an apparent forgetting of Lot’s wife in a number of artistic representations “hides a more complicated kind of acknowledgment,” (9) so too does the absence of the pianist’s point of view.

Adding to the peculiarity of this moment is the fact that we, as spectators, are the only ones privy to the event at all. Violence throughout the film is used theatrically, staged for an audience—in one example a soldier trips up a servant to rape them in front of the crowded dining room, in another, a boy is whipped brutally and a girl is fed food laced with nails during an elaborate exercise whereby all victims are gathered and implored to play act as dogs. In striking contrast, the pianist’s defenestration is a private act; no one is present to witness it, nor is it acknowledged afterwards by any of the characters. Where other instances of violence are witnessed and responded to on-screen, however abhorrently, we alone are left to consider what this gesture means.

Immediately after the pianist’s death we return to the torture in the courtyard, the film’s brutality reaching its apex. Several more minutes are spent charting the carnage outside, the libertines still alternating between roles as participant and distant observer. As the Magistrate gazes out of the window, a listless soldier, Claudio, sits on the floor nursing his gun as Carl Orff’s dark and menacing “The Joyous Face of Spring”<sup>16</sup> plays on the radio. Shortly afterwards, he changes the station to the more upbeat classical score, “These Foolish Things” that we by now recognise as the film’s ironic theme tune. Instantly, the boy adjusts the tone of the scene from the sinister to the cheerful. Claudio asks a fellow soldier if he can dance and the final image is a touching and graceful waltz (see fig. 5). Ironically, Pasolini’s darkest film ends on an upbeat and poignant note.

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<sup>16</sup> This movement taken from *Carmina Burana*, was no doubt chosen for its association with German Fascism. Composed and performed during the last years of Hitler’s Third Reich, *Carmina Burana* has also been criticised as inherently fascist. In *Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits*, Michael H. Kater describes post-World War II music critics who labeled Orff’s works as “anti-spiritual, capable of numbing the listener, of delivering him to irrational powers, thus betraying fascistoid traits” (128).





Fig. 5. Retreat into the ordinary—evil becomes banal in the end of *Salò*

Where Sade's manuscript leaves nothing to the imagination by detailing every event in his 120 days in an obsessive taxonomy, including a list of survivors, Pasolini's film points towards an ending without actually representing it. The forces that signal finality—the sound of approaching planes, the death being meted out in the courtyard—are ultimately retreated from. Instead, Pasolini's film ends on a relatively ordinary scene; focusing on the boys' dancing to the radio inside, the film concludes on the event of least consequence. As Armando Maggi observes, *Salò* lacks a sense of resolution; the film "cannot have an ending because an ending would allude to a closure, to some sort of cathartic denouement that *Salò* cannot grant" (337).

Where *Salò*'s status as disturbing has been invariably attributed to its sadism, violence, perversity and seeming disdain for both its characters and audience, I argue that what might account for the lingering affective discomfort that it instils in its viewers, its capacity to resist attempts at narrative and aesthetic closure, stems from the dynamic between these extremes and its more ordinary moments. Odd for their very placement in an otherwise exceptional setting, these moments amount to a refusal to anchor violence to coherent meaning. The pianist's suicide which interrupts our view of the theatre of cruelty taking place in the courtyard, and the literal retreat of the camera indoors from these scenes of extraordinary torture to gaze at the boys' impassive waltz are instances in which the everyday is thrown into tension with the extreme through a calculated restriction of our access to it. Like Gentileschi's depiction of Lot's daughter's gesture towards something beyond the painting's frame, Pasolini's film implores us to follow the pianist's destructive gaze, only to withhold its content. Inside, the boys dance, unphased by chaos outside, nor the sound of approaching planes. After all of the violence and horror we have witnessed, this catalogue in physical, psychological and sexual cruelty ends not with some intense image, but with a gentle waltz. Beyond the film's capacity for the immediate affect of shock and revulsion, is the more

pervasive and lasting quality of these moments and their implications—the potential for extreme horror to become coloured by the ordinary as a still accessible memory, or resource.

With its emphasis on witnessing witnessing, bids at sensorial alignment, and its attention to horrific spectacle, the next example, Elem Klimov's *Come and See* has been similarly framed in criticism and scholarship in terms of the immediacy of its affective impact. In a peculiar and momentary gesture towards the everyday, *Come and See* throws the ordinary and the extreme into tension in a way that affords the potential for a more lasting, disturbing affect. The following analysis of *Come and See* further develops my call to reframe discussion of extreme cinema, exploring how the dynamic of looking and not looking, or even looking but not seeing, serves to extend the aesthetic experience beyond the immediate horror of confronting violence.

### *Come and See*

And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. (*The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Rev. 6.7-8)

Elem Klimov's *Come and See* is a harrowing anti-war film of apocalyptic proportions. Set in World War II Byelorussia, the film follows bright-eyed and hopelessly naïve Florya, a boy in his early teens eager to join the partisans in the battle against the Nazis. Leaving his pleading mother, and very young sisters behind, Florya is quickly faced with the reality of wartime and the bounds of human cruelty. Separated from his unit, Florya returns home only to find the Germans have already ravaged the township. The boy then stumbles from one horrific vision to another: a terribly burned but still conscious village elder, the massacre of an entire village, the chilling return of his female companion Glasha after she has been brutally raped, the still gasping but horribly contorted remnants of an auto wreck, and finally, the slaughter of a group of captured German soldiers. Like Pasolini's film, *Come and See*'s grisly spectacles are far removed from any sense of ordinariness; these are exceptional, albeit factually based circumstances.<sup>17</sup> However, as will be demonstrated, amidst the film's catalogue of horrors, Florya's desperation to cleave to the everyday is a vital, if under-examined factor in the film's capacity to disturb.

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<sup>17</sup> The climax of the film's horrific spectacles is the German soldiers' herding of an entire Byelorussian village into a barn under the pretence of checking their identification papers. Instead, the structure is set alight, with the SS soldiers laughing as men, women and children scream for mercy. The film's epilogue states that "628 Byelorussian villages were burnt to the ground together with all their inhabitants."

*Come and See*'s reception is testament to its unsettling qualities. Denise Youngblood describes the film as "relentlessly grim" (194), and John Wrathall, writing for *Sight and Sound* asserts that the village massacre "ranks as one of the most appalling—in the sense of causing extreme dismay—sequences in all cinema" (29). Lloyd Michaels comments that while the censors approved, "audiences then and now seem more likely to be profoundly disturbed by the film's unrelenting insistence on the injustice, terror, and grief that are the wages of war" (213). James Chapman describes the film's bid to disturb viewers as comparable to avant-garde cinema, "its intent seems to be to discomfort the spectator and produce a sense of estrangement and 'un-pleasure'" (114). Scholar of Russian film and literature Anna Lawton likewise notes the film's capacity to unsettle, a consequence she attributes to its immersive aesthetics:

Indeed, this film does not allow the viewer to remain indifferent. The viewer's senses are relentlessly assaulted by the powerful camera work, combined with striking imagery, a harrowing soundtrack, and even a palpable illusion of smell. The medium itself, more than the narrative, conveys the horror of the war by taking the viewer through a painful physical experience. (*Kinoglasnost* 225)

This discourse of immediacy when describing *Come and See*'s affective qualities is more clearly linked to the film's mode of address than that of *Salò*. Unlike *Salò*'s distancing techniques of tableau vivant framing and one-dimensional characters, *Come and See* strongly aligns us with Florya's experience. In one noteworthy event, when Florya and Glasha are struck deaf by the explosions of a paratroop attack, the film's soundtrack is distorted to simulate their impaired senses for the next half hour of screen time. As Lawton suggests, such involvement seems to refuse the spectator an unresponsive position.

In addition to the simulation of Florya's experience through sensory manipulation, *Come and See*'s involvement of viewers is tied up in an emphasis on traumatic witnessing. The film opens with Florya and another young boy seemingly larking on the beach, however, as Youngblood points out, this notion of innocent play is subverted when we realise the pair are actually robbing graves in search of a gun with which to join the resistance (194). The boys laugh at the admonishment of Yustin, a feeble village elder, the same man who Florya will later face, burned alive but still cognisant enough to deliver reproof in the style of a cautionary tale: "Florya! Didn't I warn you? Didn't I tell you not to dig?" This is a truly horrific moment of recognition, and one of many in which Florya is brought face to face with his expulsion from normalcy into a world of adult cruelty.

These moments of revelation through abject horror become an integral part of *Come and See*'s structure. Klimov's film seems to bank on these horrific moments, playing out like a series of calls to awakening through the shock of its visuals. Where *Salò* resists giving a clear protagonist with whom to identify, so closely are we aligned with Florya's ordeal that these moments of horror amount to a bid to awaken the spectator to the visceral horrors of war as much as Florya. Indeed, *Come and See*'s ordeal is bound up in its catalogue of dreadful visions, and the corollary desire to be released from them. After his encounter with the burned village elder, for example, Florya buries his head in the mud, one of several instances where he shuts his eyes and covers his ears in an attempt to block out his surroundings.

If Pasolini's *Salò* is fascinated with mediated or framed seeing, then Klimov's film is utterly consumed by it. The young protagonist, faced with horror after horror, appears by the film's end to have aged dramatically, the complete and utter devastation of his experiences inscribed on his face (see figs. 6 – 7). Like Lot's wife who is petrified by what she has seen, Florya's body too becomes physical testament to psychic trauma. To draw on Harries's theorisation of destructive spectatorship, "it is as though certain powerful sights force the body to become a too-solid memorial to what the spectator has seen" (17).



Fig. 6 – 7. Destructive spectatorship in *Come and See*

While *Come and See*, like *Salò* is renowned for its moments of shocking violence, in the remainder of this analysis I want to examine a more subdued, though no less horrific scene that I take to be crucial to a more lasting kind of affective discomfort. Foreshadowing Florya's encounter with a long list of traumatic spectacles is a pivotal moment in which he returns home to an empty village and desperately cleaves to the familiar, denying a growing wealth of evidence that something

terrible has occurred. This is a turning point in the film which brings into tension a dynamic between seeing and not seeing, both literally and figuratively, and crucially holds taut the distinction between the everyday and the extreme.

After the paratroop attack, Florya leads Glasha back to his home. The village feels all too quiet; we still share Florya's damaged hearing but even so, there are no signs of its inhabitants. The soundscape is pivotal here in creating the unsettling absence. The lack of human sounds is eerily accentuated by the sounds that remain. As a steadicam glides backwards ahead of the approaching Florya and Glasha, we hear distant birds, the wind in the trees, an ominous creaking sound, the now barely perceptible drone that has lingered since the aerial attack, and a new sound—flies, whose incessant buzzing becomes more and more oppressive as the scene continues. Outside Florya's house, the pair stop and the camera pans left, leaving them behind to capture a piece of debris that has presumably caught their attention. It is unclear exactly what the item in the road is—a forlorn piece of clothing, a pillow perhaps—the important thing is its portentous out of place-ness.

The house is empty, Florya's sisters' dolls are laid out on the floor, the dining table littered with bread, and a fly ridden bowl. In denial of the bad signs growing increasingly obvious, Florya clings to the familiar. Inviting Glasha inside, he states calmly, "They've gone out. Sit down....They've gone out." Glasha gives a feeble smile as she enters, suitcase in hand. Finding a still warm pot of stew, Florya eagerly implores her to share. All of this is coloured with a feeling of quiet tragedy; under more pleasant circumstances we can imagine a very similar scene in which this young man invites this young woman to his family home for a meal, a version of the same events which has the potential to play out in any other way than this one.

While Florya seems unaware of the graveness of this quiet, Glasha, slightly older and no doubt more attune to the realities of war from her time with Kosach, the leader of the partisans, knows better. Kindly, she tries to play the role he has made for her, but cannot feign composure for long, and glancing across the room on her second mouthful of stew, turns behind her suddenly to vomit. Unsettled now, Florya follows her look and we are given his point of view, a creeping zoom on the girls' dolls lined up on the floor, also crawling with flies. The image is uncanny; ordinary playthings in the unexplained absence of their owners are rendered menacing, as the slow encroachment of the camera seems to articulate Florya's gradual realisation. The soundscape

simultaneously builds here to accentuate the moment of recognition; the low drone amplifies, anchoring a high pitched ringing, the sound of flies escalates, and some animal wails in the distance. In response, Florya clutches his ears with his hands, his face becoming a grimace, and unable to repress a primal groan he runs from the house.

Glasha stands in the doorway, her face torn between her performance as comforter, lodged in the ordinary, and her knowledge that things are in fact horribly wrong. Her expression twitches, teetering between a smile and sheer terror as though her muscles cannot quite decide the appropriate response. Florya, on the other hand, slips back into denial, the slight flicker of a grin transforming his, by now, familiar catatonic stare. “I know where they are. Let’s go!” The pair run from the house, but in a moment echoing Lot’s wife’s forbidden glance, Glasha turns to look back, spying a great pile of entangled corpses strewn against the side of the house (see figs. 8-9). Stifling a scream she runs to catch up with Florya, but a piece of clothing in the mud prompts him too to look backward. It is unclear whether Florya sees the bodies, his family surely among them. Glasha raises her arms out desperately, grabbing him in an attempt to shield him from the vision.



Fig. 8 – 9. Lot’s Wife—Glasha looks back in *Come and See*

This backwards gaze is not physically obliterating as in the destructive look of *Salò*’s pianist, rather it marks a kind of psychic annihilation for *Come and See*’s protagonists. This is the pair’s first encounter with traumatic looking, an event that seems to trigger the catalogue of horror that follows. In a film so heavily invested with the transformative power of vision, this scene is significant for its balancing of seeing and not seeing. Florya is called to awakening here, a call which he ardently resists. His refusal to acknowledge is played out in a cleaving to everyday objects and routines, choosing to interpret discrepancies as indexical of slight rather than grave disruptions

to the ordinary fabric of things; an empty house signals his family has gone out, a warm pot of stew indicates they have not been long gone and are likely to return soon. Borrowing from Roger Silverstone's writing on the everyday, we might consider Florya's return home and subsequent denial of calamity as an attempt to reinstate, if not maintain, "a sense of continuity and reliability of things" (1). Moments later, Florya's awakening will be forced upon him with his re-acquaintance with Yustin, however, without yet being brought face to face with the reality of the situation, Florya is temporarily able to cling to the illusion of normalcy.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that past and contemporary extremes are linked by two lines of continuity: the discourse of immediacy by which their affect is framed, and a subtle but significant dynamic by which the everyday and extreme are thrown into tension to complicate closure. Further it has sought to position an alternate approach to discerning the affective qualities of extreme cinema in the hope of unpacking "disturbing affect," defined as a sense of discomfort which persists beyond the immediacy of shock, outrage and disgust. Examining relatively ordinary moments in two ostensibly extraordinary films, I have called attention to fissures in which the films' concern with the extremes of traumatic witnessing, combined with the encroachment of the everyday, compromises the films' address and our attempts to secure violence with clear meaning. In *Salò*, it is figured as a retreat from the extraordinary; we are denied the pianist's subjectivity at a crucial moment, and then, from the spectacle of cruelty occurring outside, the camera literally retreats into the ordinary to focus on Claudio's gentle waltz with a colleague. *Salò*'s retreat into the mundane is not prompted by a need to relieve spectators of horror; in fact this withdrawal opens a gap between violence and meaning which is crucial to the extension of the aesthetic experience. In *Come and See*, the tension between the extreme and the everyday is observable in Florya's desperate attempt to hold onto normal patterns of expectation and behavior in denial of the world which is rapidly collapsing around him. In Florya's case, the signifiers required to make sense of his surroundings are present but misinterpreted in a failure to acknowledge the intrusion of violence into established and formerly reliable patterns of habit and meaning. Undoubtedly difficult for its frequent confrontations with horrific spectacle, *Come and See*'s potential for disturbing affect is in this moment reliant on our sense of the ordinary, rendered conspicuous for its temporary presence in an otherwise extraordinary setting.

Ultimately, these are discrete moments in films that are predominantly concerned with excess, violence, and immediacy. I do not mean to suggest that there is no distinction to be drawn between the likes of *Salò* and more recent examples of extreme cinema. However, I do want to point out that the kind of pull/ push dynamic between the extreme and ordinary that becomes far more prevalent in the films explored in the following chapters still has a significant role to play in some films that seem completely removed from our idea of the ordinary. While *Salò*'s ending leaves us to contemplate the banality of evil, Florya's impossible desire to return to the everyday in *Come and See* signals just how extraordinary the present reality has become. It seems that for Florya, cleaving to the familiar in the total abnegation of reality is the only response possible to a world in which horror has become so omnipresent.

What we see in later films, leading into the period of the new extremism, is a growing emphasis on the everyday in both film style and subject matter. Where I argue that the films in this chapter take their potential for a longevity of affect from rare moments of ordinariness, in the more contemporary films explored in the chapters that follow we see an inversion of this dynamic. In the more recent examples of disturbing cinema, the fabric of an otherwise prevalent everyday is interrupted by brief moments of the extreme that open a gap between violence and meaning. This chapter has looked at what I take to be an overemphasis on the role of the extreme in violent cinema's affective potential. In the following chapter I turn my attention to what too rigid categorisation of the everyday as an aesthetic category might mean, and how the tension between violence and the ordinary can be better approached.



## Chapter Three

### Everyday Style

*Money/ L'argent* (Bresson 1983), *The Seventh Continent/ Der siebente Kontinent* (Haneke 1989)

“Be precise in the form, not always in the substance (if you can)” (Bresson 119).

“Why persons behave as they do is, ultimately, not to be understood” (Sontag *Against Interpretation* 188).

### Introduction

Fifteen minutes before the end of Bresson’s final film *Money*, a kindly old woman who has taken in a self-confessed murderer asks him why he has killed—prompting that there must be a reason. Without looking up from the soup she has given him, Yvon responds in monotone “I enjoyed it. I took very little and I’ve spent it all.” This exchange provides an answer, albeit unconvincing, for the central character’s slaying of two hoteliers. The event to which he is referring is elided, but we do witness the aftermath in fragments as Yvon walks downstairs with bloodied hands, washes them—the water running red, then clear, folds a pair of bloodstained trousers and empties the hotel’s cash drawers. Yvon is visibly unmoved by this act of violence; rather he holds the same rigid facial expression he has worn throughout the film.

I open with this example which highlights the central concerns of this chapter—both the undramatic representation of violence, and a confronting deficiency of meaning with which to reconcile it. Both Bresson’s *Money* and Haneke’s *The Seventh Continent* preclude textual containment through a lack of authorial guidance on how to respond to horrific narrative events. This is achieved with a paring back of film style in which moments of violence are afforded the same aesthetic weight as the representation of ordinary and mundane routines. While chapter two dealt with ordinary moments in extraordinary films, this chapter explores another aspect of the spectrum of the everyday in cinema: the concept of the everyday as a film style, and its relationship to the everyday as subject matter. Where scholarly interpretations of the everyday as a cinematic aesthetic have been useful in illuminating positive conceptions of the everyday, I argue that a strictly positive approach is limiting. This chapter considers the shortcomings of rigid definitions of everyday film style when accounting for films such as *Money* and *The Seventh Continent*. While neither film is as restrained

in terms of narrative events or film style<sup>18</sup> as dominant accounts of everyday film style would demand, *Money* and *The Seventh Continent* could hardly be said to tend towards the melodramatic. In examining the theorisation of everyday film aesthetics, this chapter calls for an alternate approach that allows for consideration of a broader range of conceptions of the everyday that are no less valid for their departure from solely positive representations. I argue that films like *Money* and *The Seventh Continent* are better understood as embodying an indeterminate conception of the everyday, a conception that preserves the tensions that bear, as Michael Sheringham puts it, its “fruitful ambivalence” (*Everyday Life* 30). I will begin by giving a brief synopsis of both films before unpacking the issues involved in defining the everyday as film style, and exploring how such an aesthetic might be better approached to account for these examples.

Loosely adapted from Tolstoy’s short story “The Forged Coupon,” Bresson’s *Money* begins with a schoolboy, Norbert, who, needing to pay back a loan asks his parents for an advance on his allowance. Refused, he goes to a classmate for help, and the pair manage to pass a forged bank note at a photography store. Feeling like a fool, the owner resolves to pass on the note and several more that he has mistakenly accepted. The story soon shifts to focus on Yvon Targe, an innocent fuel deliveryman who unwittingly accepts the notes and is arrested when he attempts to use them. Dismissed from his work, Yvon takes a job as a getaway driver for a bank heist for which he is sent to prison. Upon being released, he murders two hoteliers, stealing their money, and then hides out at a country house run by the aforementioned elderly woman. In the film’s final four minutes, Yvon will inexplicably murder the elderly woman and her family before walking up to a group of policemen and confessing his crimes in the same affectless monotone. Despite the plot’s dramatic events, Bresson’s focus remains on the ordinary—money and other goods passing hands from person to person, objects always taking precedence over people. Events are compressed with notable brevity, and the film exercises Bresson’s signature direction of subdued, or largely inexpressive performances. Consequently, a fast paced and dramatic plot is rendered in a way that the dramatic force one might expect to be generated by such events is deflated.

In a similar style, Michael Haneke’s debut feature *The Seventh Continent* depicts three days over the course of three years in the life of an Austrian family; husband Georg, wife Anna, and daughter

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<sup>18</sup> While film style is pared back in terms of largely inexpressive performances, a lack of dramatic tension in what we would expect to be narratively dramatic moments, and minimal if any extra diegetic sound, the films in this chapter draw attention to their film style in other ways—the fragmentation of events through editing, literal accounts of everyday routines through duration, and repetition etc.

Eva. Clearly demarcated in three parts, one representing each year from 1987 to 1989, the film is punctuated with the writing of letters to Georg's parents, read in voiceover, giving a superficial overview of, and then updates on, the family (eg. Georg's employment, Anna's inheritance, Eva's health etc.). In addition, we are shown fragments of the family's lives, some of which show dramatic events (Anna's brother Alexander bursting into tears during an otherwise uneventful dinner, Eva feigning blindness at school) but most of which depict mundane and banal moments (grocery shopping, eating breakfast, the family car slowly progressing through an automated carwash). The facileness of everyday routine is emphasised through repetition; the first two days depicted feature a very similar sequence of extreme close-ups that enumerate details of the family's preparation for work/ school with only slight variations to mark the ellipsis. In the film's final part, we may be led to believe the family has decided to emigrate to Australia; this is the reason given to the bank when Anna and Georg withdraw all of their savings, Anna arranges for her brother to take over her share in their joint optometry business and excuses Eva from school, Georg quits his successful engineering job, the family car is sold, and there is talk of cancelling the newspaper subscription. On the final day, however, the family methodically destroys their possessions and commits suicide with an overdose of prescription medication, a decision vaguely outlined in another letter to Georg's parents.

### **Reframing Everyday Style**

Despite their attention to the banal, to say either film is undramatic would be inaccurate; both *Money* and *The Seventh Continent* include an array of striking plot points. Bresson's film in particular manages to squeeze a bank robbery, a botched prison escape and multiple murders into its 85-minute running time. However, both Bresson and Haneke consistently refrain from the dramatic potential in presenting narrative events, opting instead to focus on everyday objects and patterns. In *Money*, moments that warrant the most dramatic treatment are either elided completely (as in the death of Yvon's daughter, or his later suicide attempt) or displaced onto everyday objects (the acuteness of a slap, for example, is shown in a shot of a woman's hands spilling hot coffee; a prison escape is represented through diegetic sound and a flurry of shadows visible through the gap under a cell door). In *The Seventh Continent*, the destruction of household objects, and the characters that owned them, is represented in the same subdued and precise fragmentary style as the early montages depicting the family's everyday routines. In effect there is a kind of stylistic levelling of events in their being filtered through the quotidian.

There is a distinction to be made here between the everyday as subject matter, and the everyday as an aesthetic. These two things are not, of course, mutually exclusive but are in dialogue. In expanding discussion of the everyday in cinema to consider it as an aesthetic, two key works warrant close consideration—Paul Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film* and Andrew Klevan’s *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film*. Both Schrader and Klevan conceive of the everyday as a film style distinctive for its de-dramatisation and pared back expression, which has resonance in the examples cited in this chapter. However, their defining criteria would automatically exclude *Money* and *The Seventh Continent* from being considered under the rubric of an everyday aesthetic. Teasing out the distinctions between undramatic style and dramatic content, I hope to demonstrate why a broader understanding of everyday film style is useful in accounting for alternate conceptions of the everyday, specifically in accounting for the everyday in disturbing cinema.

Paul Schrader’s study of transcendental style in film, in which the everyday is a key element, examines the style of Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu, and Carl Dreyer.<sup>19</sup> For Schrader, “the everyday celebrates the bare threshold of existence, those banal occurrences which separate the living from the dead, the physical from the material, those occurrences which so many people equate with life itself” (39). This is not realism, but a stylistic choice by which the world’s energy is abated:

The desire to strip life of all expression often bypasses the reality of day-to-day living which, after all, does have moments of genuine theatre and melodrama. Given a selection of inflections, the choice is monotone; a choice of sounds, the choice is silence; a selection of actions, the choice is stillness—there is no question of “reality.” (Schrader 39)

For Schrader the everyday is a vital step in a greater transcendental style, a style that renders life mysterious (10). Attempts to explain the world, whether “external (realism, rationalism) or internal (psychologism, expressionism)” threaten to attenuate or “explain away the transcendental” (11). Instead, filmmakers like Bresson pare film style back to its bare necessities.

Following a similar corpus to Schrader, Andrew Klevan’s *Disclosure of the Everyday* examines a variety of films, including Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), Ozu’s *Late Spring* (1949), and Miloš Forman’s *Loves of a Blonde* (1967) arguing that films which are undramatic in both style

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<sup>19</sup> Published in 1972, Schrader’s book was written before the release of Bresson’s later films including *Money*.

and content have the potential to reveal profundity. Klevan defines his corpus as films that “organise their narratives around a range of life experiences unavailable to the melodramatic mode...life experiences based around the routine or repetitive, the apparently banal or mundane, and the uneventful” (1-2). He builds on this definition by distinguishing between the “everyday” as undramatic, and films that pursue realism, “conventionally described as providing pictures of everyday or ordinary life, but which are all, in fact organised around events or crisis” (Klevan 36). For instance, where it would be tempting to attribute the label of the everyday to tales of hardship such as Bill Douglas’s *My Childhood* (1972), or Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisan* (1946), Klevan argues that despite their focus on ordinary relationships and objects, these films tend towards the melodramatic.

For Klevan, films pertaining to the everyday are “not turbulent or unruly but repetitively rigid...marked by subdued styles dependent on an evenness of tenor” (44). Drawing on Stanley Cavell’s “plight of scepticism”—the paradoxical human desire to transform the ordinary in order to feel connected with it (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 172)—Klevan privileges films which “genuinely *acknowledge* the everyday; they do not need to *avoid* it or transform it,” (30) their achievement being “to reveal significance without the assertion of revelation” (207). Klevan’s everyday is quiet and measured, both in relation to a film’s style and subject matter.

For both Klevan and Schrader, the everyday is a stylistic sensibility that acts as a conduit to the profound or transcendent. Klevan speaks of films that are “able to unconceal the significance which often remains buried in the habitual” (209). By attending to the ostensibly ordinary and banal we might discover the profound. Likewise, Schrader’s study sees the everyday as a step in film’s capacity to reveal the spiritually sacred, an idea captured in his quoting of Bresson: “The supernatural in film is only the real rendered more precise. Real things seen close up” (qtd. in Schrader 62). Key here is the idea that the everyday is crucial in enabling us to access something deeper, a kind of hidden totality.<sup>20</sup> While I understand that in many respects these authors’ intentions differ from my own (Schrader is interested in the relationship between the everyday and

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<sup>20</sup> <sup>20</sup> This notion of a “hidden totality” is something I return to throughout this chapter. By invoking the term here I refer to Lukács’s sense of totality as a kind of unifying essence, as articulated in *The Theory of the Novel*: “Totality of being is possible only where everything is already homogenous before it has been contained by forms; where forms are not a constraint but only the becoming conscious, the coming to the surface of everything that had been lying dormant as a vague longing in the innermost depths of that which had to be given form; where knowledge is virtue and virtue is happiness, where beauty is the meaning of the world made visible” (34). Importantly, what Lukács means in using the term “totality” appears to change over the course of his works. For a comprehensive overview of the nuances of his use of “totality,” see Jay *Marxism and Totality* (81-127).

the spiritual; Klevan in a reading of the everyday drawn from Cavell's theory of scepticism), my call for a more expansive definition of the everyday in film style is not borne solely of a desire to engage with different films that I see as sharing an affinity with those described by Schrader and Klevan. On the contrary, it arises also in response to Klevan's definition, the nuances of which I find problematic for reasons outlined below.

According to Klevan's demarcation, *Money* and *The Seventh Continent* would be misplaced if deemed to possess an everyday style as they both feature events or crises (respectively the mass murder of, and suicide of a family) and could therefore be characterised by what Klevan calls a "limit situation" (45). The limit situation is a case not "of one event leading to another, but of one big event, where a single situation is pushed to the limits" (46). Yet it could also be argued that Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (one of Klevan's key examples), however unemphatic its treatment, also revolves around a limit situation—a young priest's crisis of health and of faith is pushed to its limit, resulting in his death. While Klevan scrupulously defines and demonstrates his conception of the undramatic, his employment of "limit situations" is less distinct. Therefore, I find it useful here to draw on Horst Ruthrof's (himself drawing on Karl Jaspers) explanation of the "boundary situation," a short story structure developing from the mid-nineteenth century in which "a narrator, or the implied reader in a flash of insight becomes aware of meaningful against meaningless existence"<sup>21</sup> (102). Such moments of existential revelation lead the character to undertake decisive action.

They are situations of sudden grief, pain, loss, guilt, disappointment, betrayal, disillusionment, or above all, confrontation with death, in which man feels called upon to come to grips with himself and to make fundamental decisions concerning the meaning of his existence not normally made under the conditions of daily routine. (Ruthrof 103)

I suspect that this idea of a character's sudden flash of awareness and consequent resolution to make the decisions "not normally made under the conditions of daily routine," is at the heart of Klevan's distinction between the everyday and the limit situation. If this is the case, however, the priest's death in *Diary of a Country Priest* is still a problematic exemplar. His final moments, which occur off-screen (a method of restraint Klevan evokes in his argument for the film's qualification as

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<sup>21</sup> David Bordwell cites the boundary situation mode of narration as common in the art cinema tradition (*Narration* 208).

pertaining to the everyday) are instead recounted to us in the form of a letter from a friend to the priest's old mentor:

Around 4:00, unable to sleep, I went to his room and found my poor colleague unconscious on the floor. We carried him back to bed, whereupon he vomited up streams of blood. But the haemorrhaging ended. While we waited for the doctor, our poor friend regained consciousness, but he didn't speak. Heavy beads of sweat covered his brow and cheeks, and his expression told of great anguish. His pulse was rapidly growing weak. He motioned that he wanted his rosary, which I found in his pants pocket. From then on, he held it pressed against his chest. He seemed to recover some strength and in an almost inaudible voice asked for absolution. His face grew calm. He even smiled. Though neither humanity nor friendship would permit me to refuse, while discharging my duties, I explained to my unfortunate comrade my hesitation at granting his request. He didn't seem to hear me. But a few moments later, he laid his hands on mine while his eyes entreated me to draw closer to him. He then said, very distinctly, if extremely slowly, these exact words: "What does it matter? All is grace." I believe he died just then.

Not directly privy to the priest's final moments, the text of the letter is narrated over the image of the silhouette of a cross. Immediately prior to this is our final look at the priest, writing in his diary, before it and the pencil he is writing with slip from his hands. He makes an attempt to pick up the pages from the floor but is too weak to do so. For Klevan, this dropping of the diary stands in for the priest's death, illustrated "not in terms of its suddenness or its finality, but in terms of the priest being unable to continue with the routine things" (85). This indeed holds true, however the letter that follows undermines the film's claim to the everyday by Klevan's definition. The description of the priest's death, replete with the corporeal tropes of horror such as entreating eyes and "streams of blood" does not suggest a use of language which is "rigidly formal" as Klevan argues (85), but a sentimental appeal to the viewer's emotions.

Schrader's description of the "decisive action" is also evocative of the boundary or limit situation. As Schrader describes, the decisive action "is an incredible event within the ban structure. The prescribed rules of the everyday fall away; there is a blast of music, an overt symbol, and an open call for emotion" (79). According to Schrader, the priest's death is the decisive action in *Diary*, the camera's focus on the cross, "a blatant symbol" (79). In Bresson's films, such an action is a "carefully planned cul-de-sac for [the viewer's] emotional activity. It simultaneously appeals to the emotions and makes the viewer aware of their futility" (85). Indeed, it is on his deathbed that the priest seems to "come to grips with himself" (Ruthrof 103). Having struggled with his faith

throughout the film in the face of a community who reject him, his final words “What does it matter? All is grace” possess the absolving weight of revelation.

My point here is that the limit or boundary situation and the evocation of the everyday in film are not mutually exclusive, nor are they easily defined. Indeed, Klevan later concedes that *Diary of a Country Priest* does have melodramatic characteristics and includes considerable instances of crisis, however, that “our engagement with the film can be deepened by thinking of it in terms of the undramatic and the everyday” and that his work is “interested in how it often subdues those moments” (*Disclosure* 99 n1). Further, in reference to Bresson’s *Diary*, Klevan states:

The film proposes melodramatic scenarios only to show how they may play out in unexciting and lethargic ways. The film therefore suggests that an often disregarded feature of some crises is that they are not suitably emphatic; they are not experienced at the heightened level one might anticipate (or hope for, or need). (83)

In light of this, I would like to argue that films such as *Money* and *The Seventh Continent*, while containing moments of crisis, are similarly subdued in their representation, and should not be excluded from a consideration of everyday aesthetics. Rather, it is my contention that these films warrant an approach that accounts for a broader examination of everyday film style as one that affords conceptions of the everyday beyond the positive.

In this regard, Lesley Stern’s distinctions between the quotidian and the histrionic are a useful point of intervention:

The terms *quotidian* and *histrionic* serve to delineate two fundamental but paradoxical cinematic propensities. My contention is not that these are two utterly distinct modalities but that they are two impulses always and to varying degrees present in cinema. (“Paths That Wind” 324)

Stern then goes on to expand these terms into the concept of stylistic inflation and deflation:

Inflation involves an ostensive propensity, an exaggeration or foregrounding of the cinematic codes (color, editing, camera movement, acting, and so on); deflation, on the



other hand, involves the playing down of the codes, an intensive, rather than ostensive propensity. (326)

Stern's terminology here opens up the concept of the quotidian in film as part of a spectrum present in all films, rather than as a strict delimited category. One can see where such a continuum might allow for a less problematic discussion of *Diary of a Country Priest's* gradations between the everyday and the melodramatic. Such terms offer a useful vocabulary with which to discuss films like *Money* and *The Seventh Continent* which, while containing histrionic elements in terms of narrative, stylistically deflate these moments.

Despite some disagreements with Klevan's categorisation, I believe his illumination of the potential profundity of undramatic narratives is incredibly useful in analysing a positive conception of the everyday. However, I think a broader account of what might constitute everyday cinema aesthetics is needed to account for alternate treatments such as those represented by *Money* and *The Seventh Continent*. For this reason, I will consider the specific issues that arise from a strictly positive account, and how we might better approach other representations of the quotidian. First, however, this chapter will explore the ambiguity surrounding acts of violence in these films, and the disparity between dramatic content and undramatic style, both of which are key to disturbing affect.

### **Style Versus Content in *Money* and *The Seventh Continent***

Critical and scholarly responses to *Money* reveal a tension between those who read its narrative as a discernable chain of events, and those troubled by the ambiguity of its violent dénouement. Writing in 1983, Tom Milne states in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* that the film:

builds a chain of cause and effect that is almost frightening in its social logic. Everybody has his reasons... Thus a line is drawn that flies straight as an arrow through the film, linking these decent, averagely honest citizens to the decent, averagely honest citizen whose life suddenly takes an uncontrollable plunge down an equally straight line from innocence to the mortal sin of murder... the meaning of Yvon's final suite of murders is inescapable: deliverance for the woman, retribution for society, expiation for his own membership of that society. (178-9)

Gary Giddens of *The New York Sun* describes *Money's* "forged banknote that brings ruin to most of those who pawn it off on unsuspecting dupes" as "defining a world so devious that petty crime

leads to wholesale slaughter” (“The Pleasure”). Likewise, Brian Price argues that Bresson’s precision in editing and colour palette functions to reveal a structure that renders Yvon’s actions inevitable (*Neither God* 195). Such readings suggest that the schoolboys’ initial act of forgery in the film is one with contagious consequences, infectious criminality spreading through the narrative and ultimately compelling Yvon to mass murder. Certainly, this is Tolstoy’s treatment, whose novella provides much more insight into character motivation.<sup>22</sup> While the film in some ways seems to prompt this interpretation—Yvon’s explanation for killing the two hoteliers, for example—it does not do so unproblematically.

Penelope Houston’s response to *Money*’s release at Cannes in *Sight and Sound* states “the film constructs an entirely logical chain of events, then, as it were, snips the links by its elliptical treatment” (171). Similarly, William Johnson’s 1984 review in *Film Quarterly* also points to the indistinctness of the film’s conclusion:

Superficially, Yvon recalls the protagonist of another film based on a classic novella—Volker Schlöndorff’s adaptation of Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas*. There too a man’s anger over an injustice escalates into an obsession that can lead only to death. But Kohlhaas’s demands always retain some link with reason, while the injustice against Yvon has more in common with the science fiction or horror film hero-victim who becomes transformed with alien powers...For Bresson, however, these powers come not from outside but from within human nature. (20)

More recently, Tony Pipolo has stated that the film “pursues an implacable logic,” (332) and, commenting on the film’s violent conclusion, argues:

Although Yvon is the victim of the mendacity of others and assumes an almost passive demeanor in three-quarters of the film, the murderous course on which he embarks in the final quarter casts a pall over the whole. (320)

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<sup>22</sup> Tolstoy’s “The Forged Coupon” features many more characters and actions and motivations are always made clear. Further, his original story has a second half in which the murderer finds atonement through the Bible and inspires others through his saintly influence. In its adaptation Bresson condenses characters, renders character motivation in the last third of the film opaque through elliptical editing and inexpressive performances, and omits the second half of Tolstoy’s narrative deeming it “too preachy” (Bresson qtd. in Roud “The Cheerful Pessimist” 11). For a detailed comparison between Tolstoy’s story and Bresson’s adaptation, see Tony Pipolo’s *Robert Bresson: A Passion For Film* (332-5).

Far from being a straightforward tale of cause and effect, *Money* for these authors is like a tightly bound rope of intertwined characters, actions and reactions that frays more and more the closer one draws to its ending.

For Murray Smith, the film's peculiar patterning can be understood in terms of a "paradoxical pattern of alignment," where our growing proximity to Yvon's story is counterbalanced by our waning access to his subjectivity (174). Discussing the film's ending, Smith observes:

Clearly, the direct link between action and character motivation—exemplified early in the film by Norbert's desire for some extra pocket money—has been broken. To some degree, this is a feature that *L'Argent* shares with many "art" films, which frequently deal with characters who have divergent and incompatible traits...But typically a degree of resolution, or at least mediation, is offered by the high degree of access we have to the character's subjectivity. Such films may not go so far as to provide a pseudo-scientific explanation of apparently contradictory behaviour, as many Hollywood films from the 1940s and 1950s do...but neither do they block all access to the character's subjectivity, as Bresson does in *L'Argent*. (179)

Smith attributes this blocking to a range of factors including the film's elliptical editing (176), a lack of close-ups of characters' faces, inexpressive performances, and Bresson's propensity for fragmenting dramatic actions into shots of body parts and objects instead of faces (175).

Indeed, Bresson is renowned for his character's flattened performances, employing non-professional casts who, in Brechtian fashion, were to "report" rather than embody or interpret their roles (Sontag *Against Interpretation* 184). For Bresson, actors were "models" to be shaped like automatons through repetition that sought to divorce action from thought (Bresson 22). However, Smith points out that in *Money*, slight modulations in performance contribute to the film's indeterminacy by frustrating the viewer's need to interpret character motivation.<sup>23</sup>

The text itself keeps drawing us back to this process of inference by the deviations from inexpressivity...The "flattening" of expressive performance is neither complete nor

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<sup>23</sup> Eric Rhode notes a similar dynamic in Bresson's films more generally: "The Naturalism of Bresson's motifs puts an irresistible pressure on us to expect the usual sorts of explanation for behaviour; but Bresson often ignores motives, quite deliberately...Because of this unresolved pressure, his heroes arouse a considerable unease in me" (41-2).

consistent, as it would have to be in order to “train” the spectator to relinquish this habit altogether. (180)

This speaks to the pull/ push dynamic of disturbing films. As I will argue, *Money*’s largely inexpressive performances, fragmentation of action, and increasingly ambiguous character motivation—as Bresson might say, its precision in form, rather than substance—leave us in want of an explanation for its violent conclusion.

Admittedly influenced by Bresson (McCann “Acting” 26), Haneke’s film style bears several similarities including a fragmented framing of events, elliptical editing, a preoccupation with objects, and often-ambiguous character subjectivity. Nowhere is this more evident than *The Seventh Continent* which, like *Money*, is typified by a blocking of viewer access to character interiority. Amos Vogel, frustrated by the film’s ambiguity in which “too much is withheld and for too long” (“Of Nonexisting Continents” 75) overstates its fragmented style: “Much of the time, faces are not shown, or if at all, only partially” (74). While this is certainly true of the film’s opening—we are not afforded a clear look at any of our protagonist’s faces for over ten minutes—it is for the most part inaccurate. Similarly, in an otherwise perceptive analysis, Roy Grundmann argues, “Radically delimited camera perspective and visual fragmentation deny access to the characters” (“Auteur de Force” 9). Significantly however, where Bresson’s film distances us with “an absence of anything closer than a medium-shot of the human face” (M. Smith 175), *The Seventh Continent* offers an abundance of lingering close-ups of characters, and yet we come no closer to discerning their psychology.

For this reason, Haneke’s film provides an interesting counterpoint to Smith’s assessment of Bresson’s. Of *Money*, Murray Smith states:

the “inexpressive”<sup>24</sup> performance style of the film, together with the placement of shots of objects and inert limbs at dramatic moments, undercut the process of affective mimicry, which provides the viewer with an empathic gauge of the emotional states of characters. (178)

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<sup>24</sup> Smith is somewhat reluctant to term *Money*’s performances as “inexpressive,” rightly arguing that the application of this quality to describe Bresson’s characters is often overstated: “Rather than characterizing the performance as ‘flat’, as a total absence of inflection on the part of the actors, it is better described as operating within a compressed amplitude. A narrower repertoire of gestures and attitudes is used to represent the same spectrum of inner states that we find in classical films, both in terms of type and intensity of inner states” (176).

Smith describes affective mimicry as “the phenomenon whereby we not only recognize but mimic an emotion expressed by another” (92). Such a process is involuntary (100). For example we might find our eyes widen and muscles tense, mirroring the vulnerable woman onscreen as she slowly traverses the dark hallway in a slasher film. A denial of access to character subjectivity is certainly attributable to a pared back style of performance in both *Money* and *The Seventh Continent*. However, where *Money* works to gradually divorce meaning from action, Haneke’s film is consistently explicit in its provision of signifiers that work to conceal rather than clarify character motivation.

Neither the structuring letters to Georg’s parents, nor the intermittent fragments of daily life provide any solid explanation for the Schober family’s death. Rarely are we afforded even a hint of character psychology; in largely guarded and inexpressive performances similar to Bresson’s characters in *Money*, Georg, Anna and Eva are all typified by a refusal to bear interiority. This lack of insight into character psychology is made pointed in rare moments of emotional outburst, reminding us that it is not that these characters are without feelings, only that we are completely denied access to the feelings they possess. For example, in one of the three scenes in which the family car travels through an automated car wash (another structuring repetition), Anna bursts into tears. We see both her anguished face in close-up, and the expressionless responses of Georg and Eva. Eventually, Georg will raise his hand and gently touch her cheek, though this feeble attempt at comfort seems to only emphasise his incomprehension. And while her emotion is clear—Anna is sad—this sadness remains undefined. Thus, while Haneke’s employment of facial close-ups may signal emotion, they bring us no closer to discerning character interiority.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ed Gallafent highlights a comparable instance of character interiority being concealed despite the focus and duration afforded them in Hitchcock’s *Under Capricorn* (1949). Describing a shot of the character Hattie alone on the balcony, he writes: “As she appears in the frame, she turns away from the balcony and leans on the window glass, facing into a breeze. Her eyes flutter open, then close as she leans back, exposing herself to the camera as the wind plays across her face and hair. I suggest that the shot offers the paradox of self-exposure (as an image, a woman, a penitent) and privacy, or self-containment; it invokes what Stanley Cavell has called the woman’s unknownness.” (“The Dandy” 74-5). Describing another shot of the same character later in the film: “...the effect of the long take here, and of the concentration of the camera on Hattie, is to expose her to us, to our interpreting eye, but what is exposed is not knowledge but unknownness: we understand that we will not be able to see and that we cannot know. Rather than an offer of privileged access, we might think of the long take here as expressing refusal, a kind of default position that applies when there is an inability to move into the ways of knowing, or offering or experiencing the world. It speaks of Hattie’s self, and what we cannot know of it” (75). Similarly, George Toles describes the final shot of *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian 1933) in which Greta Garbo stares out at the ocean after the death of her lover: “Now, as the narrative ends, the camera gradually closes in on her impassive, wind-stroked face until it fills the screen. Her expression is unreadable, and our steadily enlarging view of it oddly forestalls emotional identification even as it strengthens the invitation to probe... In such moments as this one... one of the secrets of cinema time—what it means to ‘live’ in the image—is *almost* revealed to us. Thus we are given a perfect illustration of Jorge Luis Borges’s definition of the aesthetic phenomenon: ‘this imminence of a revelation which does not occur’” (*A House* 31-2).

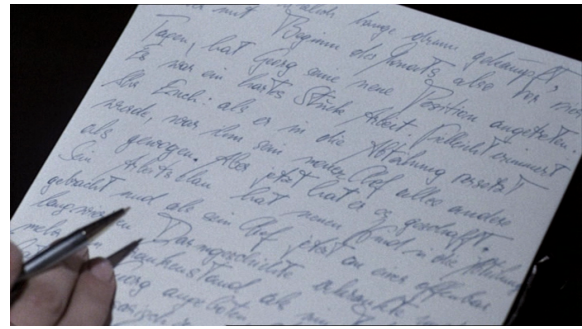


Fig. 10 – 11. Explicit signifiers of interiority bring us no closer to character psychology in *The Seventh Continent*

Likewise, the film's use of letter writing as a structural device differs from its traditional use as a means of conveying subjectivity. Where films like *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Ophüls 1948), *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont 1994), and *Atonement* (Wright 2007) employ letters to enrich our understanding of character, Haneke's use of letters in *The Seventh Continent* holds us at a distance, providing an accurate but one-dimensional summary of events.<sup>26</sup> From Anna's summary in an early letter: "As you see, when it gets right down to it, nothing but good news," to Georg's cryptic offering in the final letter: "I believe that looking at the life we have lived straight in the eye makes any notion of the end easy to accept," little is revealed, their information remaining strictly superficial.

Like a "money is the root of all evil" explaining away of Bresson's film, it might be tempting to see Georg's statement as an explanation—a simplistic tale of the ostensibly perfect bourgeois family who despair in realising their lives have become as routine and meaningless as their material possessions. This is the interpretation given by Dennis Eugene Russell who, with reference to Albert Camus, states:

By the third year depicted in Haneke's film, Georg and Anna realize they are incapable of withstanding the repetition, drudgery, and conformity of bourgeois Western culture.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Rhode notes a similar dynamic in Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, a film in which "everything is shown, yet nothing is explained" (36). Bresson's film "opens on a country priest writing in an exercise book, 'I see nothing wrong in noting here, day by day, with complete frankness, the very humble and insignificant secrets of a life which is, however, without mystery.' This promise is kept; even so, the meaning of this life (and Bresson is Romantic enough to believe that a man's life of any worth is a continual allegory) can only be caught in the opaque final words, 'All is Grace.' Everything is shown, yet nothing is explained. Why must the country priest destroy himself in pursuit of a vocation beyond his physical resources? Why is he somehow set apart from other men? Questions like these are opened freely, like doors, only to be later slammed in our face" (36).

Residing at the core of their anguish is the punishing knowledge that the game they had played for so long had sickened them unto death, and thus flight from light was preferable to another moment on this plane of pain. (50)

This is in addition to a conclusion he draws earlier regarding the Schober's "enslavement to the capitalist ethic of consumption" (45):

They spent their lives believing what their government and media told them about consumption equating with freedom and happiness, but when they felt betrayed by this notion, they responded by destroying the objects of that lie. (45)

Such justifications gesture towards a need to speak for characters in the absence of a coherent explanation. Haneke's film is disturbing precisely because in the wake of the Schober family's suicide, it refuses to define "the core of their anguish" (50). Further, there is no evidence in the film to suggest the family's feelings of betrayal by the government, nor an equation between consumption and happiness; these sweeping generalisations are indicative of the impulsive necessity of scholars and critics alike to fill ambiguity with meaning.

Totalising explanations, like those employed by Russell, when applied do not hold traction. As Peter J. Schwartz argues:

Haneke disarms pat answers not only by having his actors play unemotionally, but also by lingering as he does on the demolition; there is no facile way to get from here to psychology. We are forced by the *mise-en-scène* to consider the indexicality of the event, to ask how these deaths follow from such a life, from the spaces and things and ways it consumes and inhabits—the car, the carwash, and the garage, the road, the bedroom, the kitchen; the food, the furniture, books, records, clothing, fish tank, TV, toothbrushes, sleeping pills; the school, the optometrist's shop, the factory interior. The drama—to use a phrase of Antonioni's—is plastic: The things and the spaces play as much of a role as the people who move in their midst. ("The Void" 343-4)

Here Schwartz signals the refusal of Haneke to elucidate the meaning of what he presents. Despite the explicit attention to detail through extreme close-up and repetition, any conclusion we might arrive at to explain the Schober family's decision seems to fall hopelessly short, for the "boundary situation," the existential crisis they face is not one we share. Similarly, Eva Kuttentberg describes the film as beginning:

like a Chuck Close painting, with individual dots for which only the large screen affords a unifying frame. Unlike one of Close's paintings, where the dots add up to an image, the film maps disintegration into pixels and culminates in characters literally pulling the plug on their existence. (152)

This sense of the "unknowable" is manifest in the film's concern with vision—both seeing and not seeing, the most obvious gestures including Anna's career as an optometrist and Eva's feigning blindness.<sup>27</sup> Following the dinner scene in which Alexander breaks down, he, Georg and Anna sit watching television, a multilingual broadcast. For what feels like a long time, we watch the television also, before Alexander says: "Do you know what Mama said to me a few days before she died? 'Sometimes I wonder how it would be if we had a monitor instead of a head where we could see our thoughts.'" Haneke then frames the family's passive faces in individual close-ups, illuminated by the blue light of the television; neither Anna nor Georg show any sign of attention, their eyes remaining fixed on the screen. Consequently these words are enigmatically suspended; it feels as though our chance to know these characters, Alexander's comment offering a way in, is squandered. This moment signals the film's fundamental pull/ push dynamic; explicit gestures are made towards the characters' interiority, brought to our attention by the dialogue and the lingering close ups on characters' faces, and yet we are consistently denied access.

Despite the film's preoccupation with objects (apparent from the first preparation montage) the *mise-en-scène* is equally unenlightening as to the characters' interiority. Where *mise-en-scène* is typically utilised to extend our understanding of character, an example being our introduction to Scotty in the opening of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954),<sup>28</sup> *The Seventh Continent* pares this back also. The film's bleak industrial setting and cold colour palette are often compared to Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964)<sup>29</sup> and Schwartz is correct in his assertion that "the things and the spaces play as much of a role as the people" (344), and yet only in the sense that these people are like things. Returning to Schrader's conception of the everyday, there seems to be little separating the Schobers from the dead, the physical from the material, and the human element that does separate them is what Haneke is at pains to withhold.

<sup>27</sup> To highlight this further, in the scene where Anna confronts Eva about this lie, she turns off the children's television program Eva is watching, entitled *Shau Hin und Gehwinn*, roughly *Look Here and Win*. Oliver C. Speck gives an excellent summary of the film's dichotomy of "blindness and insight." See Speck 76-81.

<sup>28</sup> Haneke uses a similar technique in the opening sequence of *Funny Games* (1997/2007) in which we see the protagonist's four wheel drive towing a boat, whilst inside the car our view is restricted to extreme close ups of hands changing CDs as the characters play a guessing game to name opera pieces. In a classic case of cinematic brevity we are led to the stereotypical conclusion (discerned from details such as wedding rings, the connotations surrounding the type of vehicle, boat and taste in music, and dialogue such as "Did Daddy look?") that the characters are a white, middle class, educated, nuclear family on vacation.

<sup>29</sup> See Brunette 14, Schwartz 345, Speck 136-7, Wheatley *Michael Haneke's Cinema* 57-8.



It is the detached stylistic treatment of both the Schober family's daily life and their suicide that I believe qualifies *The Seventh Continent* as possessing an everyday aesthetic. I return now to Klevan's concept of everyday film style as both "repetitively rigid" and "dependent on an evenness of tenor" (44). Both *Money* and *The Seventh Continent* could be characterised in these terms, however, this levelling of style is utilised to disturbing affect for a disparity<sup>30</sup> created between such an even tenor and horrific content. This is observable in consistent patterns of framing despite the dramatic weight of what is being depicted. In Haneke's film, the earlier described scene of the family's faces illuminated by the television in a scene of banal after dinner routine is recalled towards the end of the film as Anna, Eva, and Georg sit watching television in the darkness waiting to die. Events are similarly flattened in *Money*, evident in a scene depicting the elderly woman's father playing piano, a wine glass balanced precariously on the instrument's edge. In close-up we watch it teeter and fall, another close-up capturing its shattering on impact. This event is divided in a similar pattern of fragmented action to moments of violence ranging from the aforementioned slap to the film's final mass murder. Despite the vast difference in narrative weighting between a smashed glass and the murder of a family, Bresson draws a connection through analogous framing and the emphasis placed on inanimate objects over the characters that wield them.<sup>31</sup> To tease out these gaps between dramatic content and de-dramatised representation, and between violence and meaning, I now want to focus in detail on the aesthetic treatment of both films' violent dénouements.

In *The Seventh Continent*, the Schober family's implosion occurs in the third and longest part of the film. The first signal that we have of the interruption to daily routine comes when Georg reminds Anna they must cancel their newspaper subscription. Shortly after, Georg's voiceover is heard reading the final letter to his parents, informing them he has quit his job, an event we see played out underneath his narration. Immediately after, we see tight close-ups at waist level of Georg selecting cuts of meat at what appears to be an upmarket delicatessen. I want to pause on this moment briefly,

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<sup>30</sup> My use of the term "disparity" is in reference to the gaps created in these films between violence and meaning, dramatic content and de-dramatised style, film treatment and viewer expectation etc. Schrader's discussion of everyday style uses this word slightly differently. For Schrader disparity refers to "an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action." It is "an inciting incident" which "casts suspicion on the nonemotional everyday" (42). For example, in Bresson's films, this occurs through the repetition of action—"If it is 'realism,' why is the action doubled, and if it isn't realism, why this obsession with details?" and through the evocation of something "Wholly Other within the cold environment, a sense which gradually alienates the main character from his solid position within the everyday" (71).

<sup>31</sup> This equivocating of action is not unique to *Money*. Schrader describes Bresson's tendency across a range of films: "Bresson has a rigid, predictable style which varies little from film to film, subject to subject. The content has little effect on his form. Bresson applies the same ascetic style to such 'appropriate' subjects as the suffering priest in *Diary of a Country Priest* as he does to such 'inappropriate' subjects as the ballroom sequences in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* and the love-making sequence in *Une Femme Douce*" (60).

as it seems to me to be a condensed version of the kind of troubling disparity this film brings to bear. The selection of cold cuts is a mundane enough activity, however, Georg's narration retrospectively lends it a sinister quality. Pointing to pieces of meat, Georg's accompanying voiceover states "When you have decided on something you should stick to it." We do not realise it yet, but the decision to which Georg is referring is the family's resolution to suicide. In this instance, banal decision making in the context of shopping is being equated with the choice between life and death.

Stylistically, the break from, or rejection of the daily routine established in the first two parts of the film is hardly framed as a dramatic culmination. The family's death is conveyed with the same monotonous tenor as the preceding events. Like the fragmented treatment of the family's daily habits, the destruction of their possessions is equally mechanised. Beginning with the smashing of a bookshelf, Georg pauses, observing, "I think the only way we'll make it is if we go about it systematically." The annihilation of the household and its inhabitants in part three lacks the dramatic treatment we would expect resulting in an unnerving discrepancy between style and content. Where earlier montages documented the objects and the hands that operated them (radio alarm clock, curtains, toothbrushes, coffee and tea percolator etc.), the destruction is similarly framed; this time the same hands snap vinyl records, cut up their clothing with scissors, tear apart books and flush Georg and Anna's life savings down the toilet (see figs. 12-19).



Fig. 12 – 15. Fragments of everyday banality in *The Seventh Continent*



Fig. 16 – 19. Analogous framing—fragments of self destruction

After the methodical and dispassionate destruction of their possessions, Georg and Eva sit side by side in the darkness, illuminated only by the television<sup>32</sup> on which Jennifer Rush gives a rendition of “The Power of Love” in which they seem only mildly interested. After a moment, Anna enters expressionless holding a glass and sits beside Eva, who tiredly leans into her mother. In a rare display of affection, Anna places her arm around her. We cut to the television, positioned off kilter amidst the debris. In the following shot, Eva drinks from the glass of poison. “It tastes bitter,” the child says handing it back. Shortly after, Eva’s death is indexically revealed through a series of fragments, extreme close-ups reminiscent of the earlier preparation montages that documented the family’s getting ready. This time Meatloaf sings on the television, and we see the now empty glass, the child’s lifeless outstretched arm, a syringe. The repetition of framing through fragments links this event to the banality of everyday tasks, the child’s body now relegated to the status of object. Georg’s hand turns off the television, cutting off our soundtrack.

In the most harrowing part of the film, Haneke resists allowing the film’s style to carry the weight of the content—the death of a child. Thus, a histrionic plot point is stylistically deflated. Instead of non-diegetic music to emphasise emotion, we are given (perhaps mockingly) live music

<sup>32</sup> Meghan Sutherland examines the significance of the family television in *The Seventh Continent* as “the one object that survives this consumption holocaust” (172). See Sutherland “Death, with Television.”

broadcasting: emotive appeals for mass consumption. This draws attention to both the absence of music specifically tailored for the event on screen and the inadequacy of its substitute. Michel Chion refers to this kind of asymmetrical use of music that displays a “conspicuous indifference to the situation” as producing an “anempathetic effect” (*Audio-Vision* 8). Such an effect intensifies emotions rather than constraining them while also drawing attention to cinema’s fabrication (8-9). Indeed, the use of music here, failing both to move the diegetic audience and to account for the weight of what we are seeing,<sup>33</sup> highlights how easily manipulated we are by the conventional use of emotive music. Furthermore, Meatloaf’s power ballad “Piece of the Action” which plays over the montage of Eva’s death (significantly about a man’s frustration at working towards a better future that never appears), gestures towards the feebleness of clear-cut explanations that would draw a straight line between alienating repetition and collective suicide.

This technique of drawing the spectator’s attention to a site marked by an absence, by something that is missing, is also evident in the actors’ performance. After downing her own fatal dose of sleeping pills, Anna is overcome by anguish and in a distressing image sobs over her daughter’s limp body as though trying to wrest it back to life. Anna’s affection and then outburst are striking for they call attention to the emotion that has been lacking from the family’s implosion thus far. Yet, like other emotive moments in the film (Alexander’s break down, Anna’s crying in the carwash, Eva’s tears at the smashing of the fish tank), this is also left unexplored. Anna’s tears over her dead child signal regret, but the specifics of this regret are unclear. Haneke resists providing the answers, offering no guidance on how to respond to what we see.

*The Seventh Continent* draws the viewer in with the desire to understand the interiority of the protagonists; the humanity that separates them from the routines they enact. However, close attention to objects and faces fails to resolve that which is “ultimately, not to be understood” (Sontag *Against Interpretation* 188). Attempts to decipher the Schober family’s actions are blocked;

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<sup>33</sup> Christopher Sharrett compares this use of music to an earlier scene in the film where Eva accompanies Georg to a junkyard to sell the family car. While Eva waits for her father she sees a boat passing in the distance and Alban Berg’s violin concerto “To the Memory of an Angel” can be heard. Sharrett writes: “This composition could be read as a deliberately deformed paean to late Romanticism, a piece that answers the fragment of a Bach chorale, which Haneke remarks may be seen as the film’s anthem. Neither Bach nor Berg are connected to the child’s plight, and neither these compositions nor anything else of classical culture are viewed by the world of the film as compensatory” (“Michael Haneke and the Discontents of European Culture” 11). Of the later scene where “The Power of Love” plays, Sharrett continues “The plaintiveness of the song is never diminished within the scene, but it has no more role than Bach (classical culture) or Berg (modernism) in ameliorating the alienating effects of capitalist civilization in its late phase” (11).

Haneke resists providing explanation, withholding from us a pacifying sense of ethical and moral orientation. Further, the film's horrific dénouement is rendered with a kind of stylistic indifference. Despite the striking shift in content, Haneke refuses to afford it the dramatic address we might expect, resulting in an unsettling imbalance between substance and framing.

*Money* similarly deflates the drama of its violent conclusion, Yvon's murder of a family. The fragmentation of actions, privileging of objects over people, and use of off-screen space continue the film's previous tenor in spite of the dramatic shift in the weight of its narrative content. In the dark of night, guided by a lantern, Yvon prises open the door to the family home with an axe. Like the previous murder of the hoteliers, his journey through the house is represented in fragments; shots trained on Yvon's torso, as he opens doors and moves from room to room are followed by a close-up of feet at a bedroom door as occupants get up to investigate. The only sounds we hear are diegetic, conveying the physical qualities of objects; the creak of the wooden door as it gives way, Yvon's shoes on the tiled, and then timber floor. Perhaps most alarming, however, is the response of the family dog who alternates between barking and whining as it runs through the house discovering the dead. The relegation of violence to off-screen space is emphasised as the dog runs first down the empty stairs discovering its master, only to run back up the stairs which are now obstructed by the two corpses of the couple whose feet we had seen only seconds before (see figs. 20-21). The rhythm of this elliptical exchange between open/ obstructed gives the violence a horrible efficiency. Unnaturally positioned though the couple are, the only evidence of brutality comes with Yvon's bloodstained trousers as he casually moves down the stairs. There is a chilling matter-of-factness to this shot; our dreadful recognition of the events in progress seems in conflict with the camera's sober indifference. Indeed, the entire scene has a mechanical impetus; Yvon's implacable advancement from room to room is contrast to the dog's frantic scamper as it follows in his wake, powerless to stop him. This dreadful recognition is then played out on-screen as the dog runs panting into the woman's room to stop in the doorway, finding Yvon already there. Its tongue retracts into its mouth as though in realisation, a motion which is rhythmically matched with a shot of the woman's head rising to gaze at Yvon. Her death is prefaced by Yvon's question "Where's the money?" before he raises the axe with machine-like rigidity.





Fig. 20 – 21. Violence is relegated to off-screen space in *Money*

“Where’s the money?”: for Kent Jones, author of the BFI Modern Classics monograph on the film, “the whole sequence—the whole *film*—contracts into these blunt words” (83). I am inclined to agree, and yet only in the sense that the whole of *Citizen Kane* contracts into the word “Rosebud.” By this stage in Bresson’s film the meaning of money seems divorced from the object, a kind of empty cipher. Where early in the film the transaction of money precipitated a clear chain of cause and effect (Norbert, the schoolboy needs money to pay a loan, his friend Martial convinces him to pass a forged note, the store owner is humiliated and decides to pass the note on along with some others etc.), by the end of the film its fetishistic value seems to have outstripped its use value. If Yvon is truly driven by a want of money, it seems odd that he does not give the woman longer to reply, or try any other means to coax the answer out of her before swinging the axe. My goal here is not to decipher Yvon’s actions, only to point to a troubling ambiguity that they, and Bresson’s aesthetic treatment of them, raise.

Again violence occurs off-screen with the elderly woman’s murder signalled by an upturned lamp and the resultant blood spatter on the wallpaper (see figs. 22-23). We linger on this image for a few seconds before the light expires, and for several seconds more on the still visible blood spatter in the darkness. Like Haneke’s indexical display of objects to disclose Eva’s death, Bresson’s foregrounding of everyday objects in lieu of direct representation of violent acts imbues them with an evidentiary significance; red water, spilled coffee, bloodied trousers and broken lamps become the index of violent interactions. Ordinary objects are tasked with bearing the weight of human conflict and cruelty.



Fig. 22 – 23. Broken lamps and bloodied walls—violence is displaced onto everyday objects in *Money*

The film ends abruptly after this final murder, Yvon taking a drink at a café before confessing his crimes in monotone to a group of policemen. Where Tolstoy's story documents the profound change in the woman's killer, turning to the bible and transforming the lives of those around him through his saintly influence, Bresson offers no such catharsis. Like the camera's indifference to the horrific murder of the film's most sympathetic character, the curtness of the film's closing moments feels at odds with the event's weight, effectively denying us the dramatic treatment that, in Klevan's words, "one might anticipate (or hope for, or need)" (*Disclosure* 83). That Yvon should kill the only person who has shown him genuine kindness, and to whom in the scene immediately preceding this one he had shown kindness in return, is dolorous. However, like the collective suicide in *The Seventh Continent*, Bresson's deflated style refuses to both acknowledge this tragedy and guide our response.

### Everyday Style and the "Fruitful Ambivalence" of the Ordinary

Having looked at the films in detail, this chapter will now expand my call for a broader way of reading everyday aesthetics in cinema. Where Klevan's approach is helpful in analysing positive representations of the everyday, it does not account for alternate conceptions. I will briefly illustrate why this matters when analysing the potential for everyday aesthetics to reveal profundity. For Klevan, the profundity of the everyday is located in its fundamental humanity, in Cavell's notion of feeling meaningfully connected to the world not by transcending or transforming the everyday but by acknowledging it. For example, Klevan examines the famous sequence in Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) in which the maid grinds coffee against her pregnant stomach. For Klevan, this sequence offers insight into the maid's reflection within her private kitchen space:

At one stage, she sits on a chair, grinds the coffee against her stomach, and stretches her leg out to shut the kitchen door with her foot. Her little challenge to push the door closed is like a tentative test of her body, coming to terms with her sense of herself, encouraged by this new entity inside her. Yet, the test is undramatic, almost a nonchalant gesture, taking the form of those little everyday challenges we set ourselves, those private playful provocations with which we engage, in the absence of other people. The gesture does exist as a product of a certain dreariness, but, at the same time, it is a rescuing of something from the monotony, an attempt to achieve a little victory in her kitchen. (*Disclosure* 47-8)

Klevan's analysis reveals a complexity to the ostensibly banal actions of grinding coffee and closing a door. In the maid's routine, there is something liberatory; the familiar offers both comfort and space for expression amidst repetition, not unlike the poetry and creativity de Certeau famously observed in the footsteps of Paris pedestrians in his essay "Walking in the City" (*Practice of Everyday Life* 91-110). In Klevan's corpus, the everyday and its repetitions, though challenging, seem to provide comfort and liberation in their very ordinariness.

Bresson's treatment of the everyday in *Money* however, is far less congenial, but no less valid. There is an honesty and richness to the elderly woman's routines at the country house as she digs potatoes out of the earth, scrubs clothing in a stream, and pins washing on the line; the shift in landscape from the bleak city to the Edenic countryside is alone enough to enliven the banality of daily life, and yet these actions are always inflected with the knowledge that she is a thankless martyr to her selfish family. Following her father's dropping of the wine glass from the piano's edge, we see her in the adjacent kitchen as she responds seamlessly, setting down her pile of ironing to pick up a sponge and dustpan. Such a fluid movement speaks less of interruption to daily habits (she need not even change direction from her previous action) as it does to another ingrained repetition, albeit one that condenses a history of familial dysfunction. This moment's less heartened portrayal of the everyday should hardly preclude its consideration in an analysis of everyday aesthetics.

My second contention comes with Klevan's steadfast exclusion of films which literalise the repetitions of the everyday in ways that draw attention to them as repetitions, a criterion that *The Seventh Continent*'s morning preparation montages and recurring car wash scenes would certainly be in breach of. In a comparable, and undoubtedly disturbing example, Klevan dismisses Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) from his tautology of everyday style, for "it exploits the possibilities of visual assertion" (*Disclosure* 207). *Jeanne Dielman* is Akerman's compulsive stare at the mundane life of a widowed housewife as she cares



for her teenage son and goes about her day-to-day business. In static long takes we watch her cook, clean, eat, wait, bathe, babysit, run errands and prostitute herself. Towards the film's end, Jeanne murders a client and yet this clear break with monotony is stylistically treated as though it were another household chore. Akerman describes the even tenor of Jeanne's daily life: "When she bangs the glass on the table and you think the milk might spill, that's as dramatic as the murder"<sup>34</sup> (qtd. in Margulies *Nothing Happens* 65). For Klevan, real-time, literal depictions of household chores are emphatic and obsessive, in opposition to the unemphatic, undramatic repetition of the priest's journal in Bresson's *Diary*. Klevan's distinction here is between the "repetitious" and "relentless"; his corpus resists films that invoke the literal, concentrating on those that "engage with aspects of the everyday without remorselessly displaying them" (*Disclosure* 207).

The "relentless" and "remorseless" display of everyday patterns is indicative of a privileging of style; Klevan reads literalness as affording "undue emphasis" (*Disclosure* 207). My issue with this reading is linked to my dissatisfaction with an exclusively positive account of the everyday. *Jeanne Dielman* and *The Seventh Continent* certainly use repetition, and, respectively, duration and fragmentation to portray the quotidian as alienating (in more subtle ways, *Money* does this also), which is, of course at odds with a Cavellian treatment. Again, rather than a wholesale exclusion of the film, I find employing Stern's notion of a spectrum of the everyday far more interesting and useful here. In regards to *Jeanne Dielman*, Stern speaks of an inflation of cinematic codes:

Seyrig, as actor, performs her repetitious actions not with habitual ease but with a constrained and constraining precision. Babette Mangolte's camera frames the action in a fixed, wide-angle view, rendering the muted colors of the apartment with disturbing sharpness and clarity. Although things have prominence, derived from the film's attention to quotidian moments, the camera seldom moves lovingly in on objects, tenderly following Jeanne's gestural inflections... Rather, a diegetic obsessiveness is reiterated by several cinematic codes, the conflation serving to generate an incipiently histrionic propensity (arrived at through *conflation*, not through big acting, or fast editing, or excessive camera movement). ("Paths that Wind" 330)

In contrast to Klevan's dichotomy, Stern's assessment allows for a discussion of the nuances in style and content that, crucially to the films in this chapter, are pitched in opposition. Like *The Seventh Continent*, *Jeanne Dielman* uses repetitive patterning to call attention to the monotony of

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<sup>34</sup> Rachel O. Moore observes a similar equation of everyday disruption and violent eruption in Bresson's *Money*: "Bresson's cinematography in *L'Argent* is so even, so measured that he can render the slap of a face through the consequent spilling of hot coffee with a violence that is on par with if not greater than the massacre of a family" (108).

the protagonist's days, and yet if such a calling to attention, or stylistic inflation is occurring in terms of mundane events, this is notably paired with its opposite—a stylistic deflation of dramatic events, leading to an evenness of tenor.

In *Jeanne Dielman* and *The Seventh Continent*, these stylistic devices are used to impart to the viewer the weight of habit upon the protagonists. Akerman's *Dielman* and Haneke's Schober family seem oppressed by the routines that dehumanise them. Repetition is alienating; the characters' rote performance of tasks likens them to the objects they wield. Margulies highlights this problem in the conceptualisation of the everyday as potentially utopian humanist ideal, and mechanised site of alienation:

The utopian dimension of the everyday seems to lie precisely in its resistance to institutionalization. At the same time, of course, the very attempt to frame the everyday brushes against the conventional sense of everydayness as repetitious routine. The quotidian stands, then, both for material reality and for the impossibility fully to account for it, to represent it. Hence the desire to represent materiality either concretely, by exacerbating cinematic elements, or thematically, by inscribing the signs of this reality (banal events, mundane gestures, actions irrelevant to the plot), becomes the trademark of a realist impulse. (*Nothing Happens* 26)

It seems plausible then, to equate an emphatic treatment of quotidian tasks to a negative reading of the everyday, however, this a premature conclusion to draw. In order to articulate why, I want to examine the intersecting issues at play in this equation (between style and content, fragmentation and cohesion, opacity and clarity), by drawing on Lukács's division of realism and naturalism, traditional and modernist literature, as these distinctions in many ways capture the tension between positive and negative conceptions of everyday style in film. Furthermore, in ways that I argue correlate with dominant theories of everyday film style, Lukács's schema draws a direct link between an artwork's coherence, that is, the accessibility of its meaning, and its value.

In his essay "The Ideology of Modernism," Lukács details his division between realism and naturalism in literature and other arts. Essentially, this is a distinction between realist works that privilege content, and naturalist works that privilege form. For Lukács, in realist and traditional literature, "content determines form" (*Meaning of Contemporary Realism* 19). Characters' individuality is inextricably tied to their historical context; this history is fluid, man being defined through his interactions with the world and with others (19).

In contrast, according to Lukács, modernist literature regards history as static (21), and man is “incapable of meaningful relationships” with others (24). With reference to Heidegger, Lukács argues of the nature of man in modernist writing:

He is “thrown-into-the-world”: meaninglessly, unfathomably. He does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only “development” in this literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition. (21)

In this way, the specifics of history are irrelevant; the settings, however detailed form mere backdrops for abstracted visions of human nature (21).<sup>35</sup> Instead, modernist literature tends towards allegory (40).

One can see how Lukács’s definition of modernist depictions might apply to films like *Money*, *The Seventh Continent*, and *Jeanne Dielman*. Bresson’s film is identifiably shot in Paris, and yet it seems more important that we recognise the opposition between city and country rather than any specific locale. Likewise, Haneke’s *The Seventh Continent* makes no specific reference to its setting beyond the family car’s licence plate.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to some of Haneke’s other films; for example *Hidden*, in which the Franco-Algerian conflict plays an important role, or *The White Ribbon* (2009) which is significantly set in Germany on the cusp of World War One, *The Seventh Continent* feels hermetically sealed by comparison. The morning radio broadcast that routinely awakens Anna and Georg is melded into the fabric of the everyday’s background noise rather than detailing events that

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<sup>35</sup> Lukács cites examples such as James Joyce and Franz Kafka: “A gifted writer, however extreme his theoretical modernism, will in practice have to compromise with the demands of historicity and of social environment. Joyce uses Dublin, Kafka and Musil the Hapsburg Monarchy, as the locus of their masterpieces. But the locus they lovingly depict is little more than a backcloth; it is not basic to their artistic intention” (*Meaning of Contemporary Realism* 21).

<sup>36</sup> Notably, this was Haneke’s intention. In an interview with Serge Toubiana, Haneke explains: “I wanted the film to stay neutral. I didn’t want to have recognizable Viennese elements. Because I think the film should be able to take place anywhere” (Haneke “*The Seventh Continent*”). In “Attenuating Austria: The Construction of Bourgeois Space in *The Seventh Continent*,” Benjamin Noys takes issue with the argument that the film is not nationally specific. As evidence, Noys cites three elements of the film; a line of dialogue which indicates the speaking character’s disgust at German accents, the use of the Austrian schilling and its noticeably inflated value, and a linguistic confusion (outside of the film) between Austria and Australia, the latter featuring in a tourist advertisement at the beginning of the film and becoming a motif image. This seems to me a strange line of argument, the film of course having to be set somewhere, rather it seems far more important as to how integral this location is. The last two of Noys’s three points, at least, are overstated—the significance of the couple’s withdrawal of their life savings from the bank is not the fact that it is the Austrian schilling, or that we are likely to compare this amount to the cost of the tools they buy and determine a rate of inflation in comparison to our own foreign unit of currency, it is that it is clearly their life savings. Likewise, contrary to Noys’s statement that Anna “has to correct a possible error by the bank clerk by stating she means emigrating to ‘Australia’ because of a possible linguistic confusion with Austria,” (145) there is no evidence of this in the film. In this scene, Anna simply responds to the clerk’s question regarding their need to withdraw all of their money at once—there is no confusion.

have any impact on them personally. As Kuttentberg points out this stream of news is “neither discussed nor processed but is merely white noise against which to perform the morning routine, perfectly blended into the everyday without requiring engagement” (162). The designation between 1987-89 serves to reinforce a lack of change, and refers to the true story the film was inspired by. Further, while Akerman’s film explicitly states its location in its title, right down to the protagonist’s street address, this functions as another indication of the superfluity of details that form the film, rather than as a signifier of individuality. Instead of fashioning the distinctiveness of their characters, these settings, all easily interchangeable, serve only as the stage upon which their characters’ existential crises unfold. Therefore, in opposition to realist texts in which form is determined by content, just as characters are shaped by the particulars of their environments, modernist texts are prone to the abstract rather than the concrete, and fragmentation as opposed to coherence.

Furthermore, the modernist abstraction detailed by Lukács also seems applicable to the characters’ interactions with others, and by extension the audience. This is in part due to the coldness of the performance style, largely stripped of vitality, but also to the trouble characters seem to have in communicating meaningfully with one another. We might recall Yvon’s plea for his wife, Elise, to “Say something!” when she visits him in prison. It will later be revealed in a letter that her reluctance to speak was due to the death of their daughter. Over the shoulder of a woman in the prison mailroom, we read, “That’s what I wanted to tell you but I couldn’t say it.”

Similarly, the theme of failing communication forms a major thread not just in Haneke’s *The Seventh Continent* but also through his next two theatrical releases, *Benny’s Video* (1992), and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994) which form the “Glaciation Trilogy” (Grundmann *A Companion* 18), alongside others, most notably *Code Unknown* (2000). There are numerous moments in the film indicative of individual isolation, including those outlined previously—Alexander’s ignored attempt to reach out to his family after dinner, and Georg’s delayed and uncertain reaction to Anna’s outburst in the carwash. Still more explicit gestures to this effect are made when amidst the family’s implosion, members of the telephone company arrive to inform Georg that leaving the handset displaced is against the law.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Eva Kuttentberg provides an engaging analysis of *The Seventh Continent* as allegory, and the film’s depiction of deteriorating communication. For Kuttentberg, the film’s use of allegory gives it its indeterminacy: “After enduring the visually intense experience of watching nearly two hours of an unassuming middle-class family drift toward

The violence that concludes each of the films further speaks to Lukács's criticism of a modernist predilection for psychopathology as a flight from the mundane. Quoting Alfred Kerr:

Morbidity is the legitimate poetry of Naturalism. For what is poetic in everyday life? Neurotic aberration, escape from life's dreary routine. Only in this way can a character be translated to a rarer clime and yet retain an air of reality. (qtd in Lukács *Meaning of Contemporary Realism* 28)

Lukács goes on to criticise psychopathology as a modernist device as ineffectual because, if historical specificity is arbitrary and the depicted world static, "human activity is, *a priori*, rendered impotent and robbed of meaning" (36).

Significantly, Lukács's critique of modernism is not just a question of style, but one of access to the authentic, that is, the everyday's hidden totality. In this sense, an artwork's value is directly linked to its legibility. Christopher Williams provides an apt summary of Lukács's distinctions:

between the "apparent form" of the art-work and its "inner core" or essence, through which the conscious reader can gain access to the real truth of a historical situation, and between "naturalism," which, albeit with great detail, shows only the appearances of situations, and "realism," which by using devices like the historically typical character and action, functions in the same sort of way as the "inner core." "Naturalism" describes events but without providing the reader with a key to understanding them; and thereby denies him/her access to the truth... (11)

For Lukács, the purpose of art is to reveal truth. As György Márkus's entry on Lukács in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* states:

Art emerges out of the fundamental human dissatisfaction with the ambiguity, context-dependence, and pragmatic limitedness of everyday processes of communication, always

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collective suicide, the viewer...might wonder 'what the picture wants,' an expression borrowed from W.J.T. Mitchell. Mitchell's kinship with Haneke rests in the power of images effectively communicating lack and absences and in Haneke's case, causing profound discomfort and signaling a social order in disarray...Playing intimacy against detachment, he overtly signals failing communication and disintegration in the post-industrial world. Haneke then precisely amasses shots of minute details to map large-scale social change rooted in and exemplified by the nuclear family: patriarchy declining in spite of professional success; feminism failing in spite of gracefully combining motherhood and work; innocent childhood ending with participation in a collective suicide...Haneke shies away from a didactic model of problem presentation and strategies of resolution and instead employs allegory as 'a genuine structural element' to map contingencies, invite multiple readings, and help 'preserve a certain ambiguity.'" (151-2)

prone to be misunderstood. It is an attempt at the creation of a cosmos of transparent meanings, understandable and eternally valid for everyone. (169)

For this reason, according to Lukács, modernist texts fail as they deny access to coherent meaning. There is a correlation here with Klevan's emphasis on the ontological equality of everyday cinema, and its unassuming style. Like Lukács's privileging of aesthetic unity over fragmentation or rupture, Klevan's everyday style, and the revelation of profundity, arises out of an attention to the patterns and repetitions of daily life, rather than their aesthetic emphasis. Similarly, Lukács's criticism of texts that invoke the eccentric and neurotic as an escape from the everyday finds its parallel in Klevan's rejection of films that need to transform or evade the ordinary through crisis and the limit situation. Further, it seems for both authors that life's profundity should be conveyed through texts that, in Klevan's words, "reveal significance without the assertion of revelation" (*Disclosure* 207).

I have argued that, at least ostensibly, Lukács's definition of modernist texts seems to encapsulate the worldview at work in the films examined in this chapter. Considered in this way, Yvon's mass murder at the end of *Money*, or the Schober's collective suicide in *The Seventh Continent* would be fundamentally empty gestures. For Lukács, the depicted world can have no hidden totality; without the objectivity and cohesion of realism, meaning is negated. However, I contend that a text that denies meaning is not the same as a text that is meaningless, just as a film that stylistically inflates the everyday does not automatically equate to a negative conception. Because of the ambiguity surrounding their (anti)climactic acts of violence, it would be a mistake to deem them as simply disapproving. Judging these films as ideologically opposed to the everyday would be to regard them as conclusive tales of cause and effect in which the monotony of the everyday becomes the definitive catalyst for violence. I have already suggested why such a reading is problematic.

Instead, these films are better understood as conveying an indeterminate conception of the everyday, one that maintains the tensions that afford it "its fruitful ambivalence" (Sheringham *Everyday Life* 30). This is not to suggest that works that privilege ambiguity are of more value than those that do not. Rather, I mean to assert that the lack of closure that these films provide through their indistinct treatment of the everyday is both integral to their disturbing quality, and reason for a broader treatment of everyday film aesthetics. Crucially, these are not worlds stripped of their profundity, caught in meaningless circuits of dehumanising tasks. The everyday's hidden totality is equally present, and, while tauntingly close, we are not granted access to it.

Both films end without offering sufficient meaning with which to reconcile their final acts of violence. *The Seventh Continent* concludes with the death of Georg. Lying on the bed beside his already deceased wife and daughter, he stares vacantly into the television screen, which now displays static. Against the sound of the television's failed transmission, fragments of preceding moments of the film are interspersed, (close-ups—the carwash, faces, objects, transactions etc.) in what might be flashbacks. If we are to interpret this collision of images as Georg's memories, this might be a glimpse into character interiority, and yet even so, they provide us with no new information or insight. Rather than accruing meaning through montage, these images remain independent fragments. Our final image is a close-up of the television's white noise. No longer contextualised in the diegetic television's frame, the teeming mass of black and white particles overwhelms the screen—an image that is paradoxically both something and nothing. Haneke holds this static for an inordinately long time before cutting to black, and a brief epilogue of text outlining events that followed. Describing Georg's parents' disbelief at the prospect of the family's suicide, prompting a homicide investigation, the film's epilogue underlines both the absence of coherent explanation for the Schobers' death, and the frustrated need to contain events through the attribution of meaning, a dynamic that applies to the film itself in its troubling lack of closure.

Bresson's *Money* similarly seems to acknowledge this frustrated desire for closure. Immediately after Yvon's forthright admission of murder to the police, a crowd gathers to watch as he is escorted out of the café. In the film's final shot, Bresson's camera is positioned to peer over the shoulders of the silhouetted onlookers as they stare at the procession of officers and the handcuffed Yvon. Notably, the on-screen observers' heads do not turn to follow as the group walk by. Instead, long after these characters have left the frame—approximately ten seconds in fact—the crowd continues to stare through the open doorway as if in wait of something more (see fig. 24). Their gaze, and our own, is unreciprocated however, as the screen cuts to black. In *Money*'s final shot, the viewer's desire for, and the film's denial of, coherence and closure is played out on screen.



Fig. 24. Textual openness writ large in the final shot of *Money*

## Conclusion

Central to my argument throughout this thesis is the idea that disturbing affect is attributable to a preclusion of textual containment; the aesthetic experience of the text is extended through the opening of a gap between violence and meaning in a variety of ways. In this chapter I have examined films in which textual openness is apparent through both an equivocating of the dramatic and the banal on the level of film style signalling a lack of authorial guidance, and in the denial of subjectivity that would render the characters' turn to violence legible. In Bresson's film, this occurs in the gradual dissociation between action and meaning; the links in the narrative's chain of cause and effect grow ever more tenuous until they seem to dissolve altogether, making Yvon's massacre at the film's end hard to fathom. In contrast, Haneke's *The Seventh Continent* is explicit in its provision of would-be signifiers as to character subjectivity, yet, these only serve to call attention to the film's consistent refusal to clarify meaning. Further, both films pare back style, proceeding with an even tenor regardless of dramatic shifts in content. Extreme acts of violence are thus treated on par with banal day-to-day activities, in effect creating an unsettling disparity between substance and framing. I have also argued for a more inclusive approach to analysing everyday aesthetics in cinema, one that is both able to account for varied conceptions of the everyday as well as attend to its fluctuating degrees and nuances. Where *Money* and *The Seventh Continent* create a stylistic parity between the banal and the extreme, the following chapter examines films in which the break with the everyday is acutely registered. Chapter four develops this investigation into textual openness and the unsettling lack of authorial guidance in relation to genre and orienting structures in Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl*, and Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*.



## Chapter Four

### Everyday Structures/ Everyday Language

*Fat Girl/ À ma soeur!* (Breillat 2001), *Twentynine Palms* (Dumont 2003)

Why does the violence in films like this not only shock critics deeply but knock their critical faculty so far off balance?...What the critics seem to fear is *contamination*. The director is involved: if we respond, we become involved too. Violence is a vampire bite.

(Barr “*Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange* and the Critics” 26)

### Introduction

Released in 2001, Catherine Breillat’s *Fat Girl* left many critics confounded. For eighty-one minutes of its eighty-six minute running time, the film is a quiet coming of age story of two teenage sisters. Unexpectedly, however, the film ends with a random act of violence: a bloody axe murder, strangulation, and rape. This sudden turn to extremes incited a mixture of bewilderment and frustration in reviewers. Bob Strauss of the *Los Angeles Daily News* for example, regards Breillat’s move here as an “astounding misstep”:

It’s a gratuitously violent ending that comes so far out of nowhere, you can only imagine one of three excuses for it (and none of them good ones). Either Breillat simply couldn’t figure out where her movie needed to go...or she somehow decided that her artistic signature requires strong doses of shocking sensationalism in every movie, whether they belong there or not; or, most probably as well as ludicrously, she’s suggesting that all male predation operates on a reductive scale on which there is little space between seductive youthful dissembling, marital indifference and sheer monstrosity. (“*Fat Girl* Heavy on the Heartbreak”)

Karina Onstad’s review in the *National Post* is also telling for its frustration at the seemingly illogical rupture in narrative:

Then Breillat does something much more objectionable than any sex scene: She tacks on a five minute ending at once violent and surreal, undercutting the neo-realism she so painstakingly constructed...what happens is frustratingly—dangerously, even—open ended in meaning, and that makes it an extreme cop-out. (“A Story That’s More Tragic”)

Similarly confused by the violent ending, Carla Meyer's review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* states that despite being "undeniably riveting, the scene is so out of step with Breillat's otherwise careful plotting that it comes off as a stunt" ("A Sisterhood"). For Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian*, the violence constitutes "a shocking but empty gesture," stating, "the effect of this grotesque eruption following what had been a very well-observed and well-acted human drama is baffling" ("The First Seduction"). In an ambivalent review, Linda Ruth Williams for *Sight and Sound* comments on the film's "flawed brilliance," before broaching the "tricky issue of the shock ending." Here, Williams's tone turns cynical, surmising that Breillat's turn to violence may be a last ditch attempt to maintain her authorial persona as a *provocatrice*: "Perhaps Breillat, reflecting the mismatch between her reputation for shock and *À ma soeur!*'s hitherto relative sobriety, felt that she needed to do something to up the ante" (Williams "*À ma soeur!*"). Finally, Kirk Honeycutt of the *Hollywood Reporter* reasons: "In life, of course, irrational and inexplicable events happen. In film, especially in third acts, such actions betray an artistic laziness" ("Strong Sister Act Stumbles").

These responses call attention to an interesting critical problem that this chapter seeks to unpack regarding how sudden and violent disruptions to the everyday are to be interpreted. Where the previous chapter examined films in which the illegibility of violence was elicited through its stylistic equivocation with the ordinary, this chapter examines films in which the intrusion of violence into the everyday, and the difficulty in attributing meaning to it, is marked as a definite rupture. Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl*, and the similarly structured *Twentynine Palms* by Bruno Dumont, establish familiar patterns and worlds only to break them with unprecedented bursts of violence in their final minutes. Grappling with this seemingly illegible change, critics and scholars often focus on the extremity of the films' climax—citing a shift in genre, or dismissing it as mere shock tactics: a self-indulgent auteur's attempt at provocation. While these claims have gone some way to explaining the move at work in these films, they do not account for disturbing affect. Drawing on the work of Deborah Thomas and George M. Wilson, I argue in this chapter that it is rather the films' broader orienting structures, congruent with the theoretical distinctions between positive and negative conceptions of the everyday, and the relationship between these structures and the disruptive moments of violence that pave the way for disturbing affect. Considering issues of authorship, genre, and aesthetics, this chapter argues that while *Twentynine Palms* and *Fat Girl* are structurally analogous in their abrupt turn to violence, this is neither just shock tactics nor a formulaic recipe for the disturbing. Rather, their capacity for disturbing affect is contingent on their more nuanced treatment of this transition and all that leads up to it. I will begin by summarising the key threads of contention among critics, before moving into scholarly interpretations of this shift to

violence. Finally this chapter will offer an alternate way of addressing the apparent incongruence of the violence in these films.

### ***Fat Girl, Twentynine Palms, and the Critics***

A brief synopsis of both films will help to illustrate the structural affinity of the shift from the ordinary to the violent that I will be examining, and better contextualise the films' critical reception. *Fat Girl* depicts a wealthy French family on vacation in a seaside village. Chided throughout for being overweight, Anaïs is younger but worldlier than her slim and beautiful sister, Elena. In the film's first scene, the two wander the woodlands surrounding their villa and Elena challenges Anaïs to see who can pick up a boy first. Soon after, Elena is seduced by a much older, handsome Italian law student named Fernando. Offering Elena an expensive engagement ring and declaring his love, Fernando convinces the reluctant and underage Elena to sleep with him. In the same room, feigning sleep, Anaïs quietly sobs as her sister is deflowered. A visit from Fernando's mother reveals the ring belongs to her, and Elena's illicit tryst is discovered bringing the holiday to an abrupt end. The long drive home is fraught with tension; Elena is heartbroken and ashamed, her mother furious, and Anaïs upset at being caught in the middle. With a duration of under ninety minutes, we know the film must close soon—perhaps with a reprimand from the girls' father, perhaps a car accident (Mrs. Pignot's growing fatigue behind the wheel is emphasised) or maybe the family's circumstances will be left unresolved. Instead, in the final five minutes the narrative is suddenly disrupted by a random act of violence; on a night time rest at a road stop, an axe-wielding maniac smashes through the car windscreen striking Elena in the head before strangling her mother. Frozen, Anaïs watches from the back seat. The man backs Anaïs into the woods, forcing her underwear into her mouth and raping<sup>38</sup> her. The film ends the following morning, the police bagging evidence at the crime scene. Two officers escort Anaïs from the woods, "She says he didn't rape her," one tells another. Anaïs is quick to add, "Don't believe me if you don't want to," before turning to glare just off centre; the film freezes on this frame for some time before the credits roll.

Similarly structured, Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* follows an adult couple: emotionally unhinged Katia and her pretentious photographer boyfriend David travel the Californian desert supposedly scouting for locations for his upcoming project. The couple spends the majority of the

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<sup>38</sup> The nature of this event, as rape, or not rape, is highly contested. For reading on this issue see: Fox-Kayles "À ma soeur!," "Horeck "Shame and the Sisters," Maddock and Krisjansen "Surrealist Poetics," Wheatley "Contested Interactions."

film alternating between sex and arguments of equal fervour, interrupted only by banal conversation and driving through the sweeping landscape. For the most part the film is slow, repetitive, and establishes a predictable pattern of arguments and reconciliations. However, like Breillat's film, *Twentynine Palms* erupts into violence towards its ending. On another desert drive, thirteen minutes shy of its two hour running time, the couple's Hummer is rammed by a pick up truck full of archetypal rednecks who beat David's face with a baseball bat before raping him. Katia is meanwhile stripped naked and forced to watch the brutalisation. Back at their motel, David refuses to seek police help, and bursting from the bathroom screaming, his hair haphazardly cut off, stabs Katia to death. In the film's final shot, a police officer finds David's naked corpse in the desert before wandering into the distance while arguing with a fellow officer over his radio.

Both *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* were released in the early 2000s, amidst the body of work retrospectively known as the new French extremity. Structurally, the films follow a comparable pattern—the majority of the running time is spent tracing the dramas of human relationships in a space away from home, before acts of random violence disrupt the film worlds in the final minutes. Both end with the perfunctory police response to this violence. Likewise, both are the products of provocative French auteurs. There are also, of course, important differences: Breillat's film is set in France, while Dumont leaves the provincial setting of his previous work to shoot in the American desert. Further, *Fat Girl* focuses on adolescents and follows the difficulties of a romantic formation, while *Twentynine Palms* deals with adults who struggle with its maintenance.

Despite these differences, within the films' climactic violence is a comparison worth pursuing. While it is the nature of the new French extremity, and its intersecting cousins (*cinéma du corps*, cinema of sensation, the unwatchable etc.) to feature bursts of violence, very rarely is the shift quite so marked off from the rest of the film. François Ozon's *See the Sea/ Regarde la mer* (1997) for instance, culminates in the off-screen murder of its protagonist, a lonely young mother who has taken in a female backpacker for companionship. Returning home from a business trip, the woman's husband discovers her naked corpse, bound in rope, her head wrapped in plastic. Horrible as her end is, it is not entirely unexpected; the backpacker (played with a disconcerting lack of expression by Marina DeVan) is palpably menacing throughout, her behaviour ranging from brazen rudeness to perverse cruelty. Similarly, Claire Denis's vampire tale *Trouble Every Day* (2001) contrasts the banal with graphic violence, yet this violence is both dispersed throughout and made

apparent in the film's promotional materials—the majority featuring variations of an image of Beatrice Dalle, her white dress and pallid features drenched in blood.

Another point of comparison comes in the incomprehension at the respective films' violent dénouements articulated in their critical reception. Interestingly, the accusations of ineptitude and pretension aimed at *Fat Girl*'s violent ending with which I opened this chapter were also launched in reviews of Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* released two years later. In the opening paragraph to his article on the new French extremity, Quandt describes the abrupt shift from banality to bloodshed:

The convulsive violence of Bruno Dumont's new film *Twentynine Palms* (2003)—a truck ramming and a savage male rape, a descent into madness followed by a frenzied knifing and suicide, all crammed into the movie's last half-hour after a long somnolent buildup—has dismayed many, particularly those who greeted Dumont's first two features, *Life of Jesus* (1997) and *L'Humanité* (1999), as the work of a true heir to Bresson. Whether *Palms*' paroxysm of violation and death signals that Dumont is borrowing the codes of Hollywood horror films to further his exploration of body and landscape or whether it merely marks a natural intensification of the raw, dauntless corporeality of his previous two films, it nevertheless elicits an unintentional anxiety: that Dumont, once imperviously impervious to fashion, has succumbed to the growing vogue for shock tactics in French cinema over the past decade. ("Flesh and Blood" 18)

Quandt continues his attack later in the piece,

where the extremity of Dumont's previous films was incorporated into both a moral vision and a coherent *mise-en-scène*, in *Twentynine Palms* it is imposed and escalated, the product of Dumont's slack, manufactured sense of American imbecility...He has called his approach equal parts "truth and poetry." Absurd, false, self-important, *Twentynine Palms* manifests instead a failure of both imagination and morality. ("Flesh and Blood" 24)

Quandt's accusation of pretension is indicative of a common critical position. For example, in his critique of the film for *The Denver Post*, Michael Booth states:

Dumont writes, in bloviated production notes, of being bored by traditional form. Fine. In that case, his languorous shots of the humbling American desert would suffice. But then, weary of his own movie, he throws in a huge, inexplicable explosion of action near the end. Dumont wants it both ways, like the Americans he seeks to critique." ("Twentynine Palms' shocks without value")

Labelling the film a “Zabriskie Pointless,” Lisa Nesselson of *Variety* is similarly critical of *Twentynine Palms*’s violent dénouement:

And in the final reel, something happens—the kind of something press kits politely implore scribes not to reveal. Those Euro crix for whom the pic’s existential idiocy may register as exotic will no doubt attempt to imbue the late-arriving events with deeper meaning. (*“Twentynine Palms”*)

In addition to these accusations of pretension, is the charge that such a transition is the product of inept filmmaking; Ty Burr of *The Boston Globe* deems the ending “miscalculated and laughable” (“Explicit ‘Palms’ is More Silly Than Shocking”).

Evident in the negative reviews of both *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* is an irritation with the inability to understand why the films change in the way they do. The consensus among the critics quoted above appears to be that the shift is illegible in relation to the rest of the film; it is “gratuitous,” “tacked on,” “out of step,” “baffling,” “inexplicable.” Further, to try and make sense of this violence is to suppose one or more of the following:

1. The director did not know how to end their film out of incompetence, laziness, or gross misjudgement.
2. The director’s authorial persona is at odds with the film they have created; Breillat’s persona as a provocative filmmaker requires the employment of shocking material regardless of its inappropriateness; Dumont’s persona as a serious, philosophical filmmaker in the Bressonian tradition is compromised by an uncharacteristic departure into shock tactics.
3. The director’s concern is with pretentious and ultimately empty messages.

I want to start by addressing the second point of contention, regarding how *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* are to be interpreted in the greater context of their directors’ work, as this provides a valuable way into the films, and to the other points of criticism which will be approached later in this chapter.

## Authorial personas

Dumont's films prior to *Twentynine Palms* had combined the extreme and the ordinary (though certainly not to the same degree), finding the sacred in the everyday. Both of his previous features contain moments of hard-core sex and graphic violence amidst their otherwise dilatory meditations on human nature and painterly landscapes. The teenage protagonist of *Life of Jesus/ La vie de Jésus* (1997) ends an ongoing racial feud when he brutally beats his Arab rival to death. Further, the opening minutes of Dumont's police procedural *Humanity/ L'Humanité* (1999) contain an unsettlingly explicit close up of a raped and murdered child's bloodied genitals. Despite these confronting images, Dumont's pared back style, employment of non-professional actors, and allusion to the spiritual and existential properties of the everyday had, in his first two features, established a stylistic affinity with Robert Bresson (Coulthard "Uncanny Horrors" 172).<sup>39</sup> While Dumont was always a provocateur, it is a perceived break with the austere Bressonian positivism of his previous films that Quandt's aforementioned critique finds troublesome. While I would agree that the redeeming glimpses of humanity amidst the world's violence afforded in Dumont's first two features are indeed absent in *Twentynine Palms*, for reasons I will demonstrate later in this chapter, to regard this as the catalyst for an incoherent *mise-en-scène* is misguided.

As evidenced in the negative reviews cited earlier, Breillat's *Fat Girl* was also subject to such criticism, despite its excess being less of an anomaly in the context of the director's *oeuvre*. Her debut feature *A Real Young Girl/ Une vraie jeune fille* (1976) contains a wealth of transgressive imagery; early in the film, its fourteen year old protagonist masturbates with a spoon under the family dining table, and later we are privy to a sexual fantasy in which the man she desires has tethered her to the ground with barbed wire before trying to insert a live earthworm into her vagina. Her later *Junior Size 36/ 36 fillette* (1988), likewise focuses on a young woman's sexual curiosity. Douglas Keesey notes *Fat Girl* as "the third film in what could be called Breillat's 'virgin trilogy'" (*Catherine Breillat* 42). While these three films are separated by others—notably that focus on adults—it is significant that all her features to date deal with female sexuality and experience with candour. Immediately preceding *Fat Girl*, Breillat's sixth feature, the sexually explicit *Romance* (1999) gained notoriety when it faced censorship issues for its depiction of rape, taboo images of

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<sup>39</sup> Several critics mention this likeness. For example Brett Bowles notes in his review of *The Life of Jesus* that "Dumont, taking his cue from Bresson, eschews sociological analysis in favor of metaphysical reflection" (47). Emma Wilson likewise notes the "Bressonian spirituality" of Dumont's first two features (19). In reference to Dumont's *Humanity*, David Sterritt and Mikita Brottman regard Bresson as "the film's implicit muse" (233).

male arousal and actual sex. Her 2004 film *Anatomy of Hell/ Anatomie de l'enfer*—a study in the abjection of the female body—is perhaps the most transgressive to date.

While violence is not uncommon in Breillat's films, more often than not it occurs off-screen, as in the accidental shooting of Jim in *A Real Young Girl*, and Marie's murder of her sleeping boyfriend in *Romance* as she leaves the apartment having turned the gas on. Perhaps the closest we get to the horrific violence that ends *Fat Girl* in Breillat's earlier work is the brutal murder of Frédérique in the ironically titled *Perfect Love/ Parfait amour* (1996). The film ends abruptly after her boyfriend sodomises her with a broomstick and stabs her to death. However, unlike the violence in *Fat Girl*, this event is known to occur from the beginning. *Perfect Love* opens with a documentary-esque handheld camera recording of the killer as he reconstructs the crime for the investigating police officers. In this sense *Fat Girl*'s unexpected, on-screen axe murder and strangulation marks a departure in Breillat's work.

While I acknowledge that *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* differ in significant ways compared to both directors' prior works, I do not think we should be so quick to regard change as erroneous. The first and third points regarding claims of ineptitude and pretension are fleshed out in detail in my own analysis of the films later in the chapter. For now, however, I want to signal a general response to these claims. The problems with this line of argument are not the dissatisfaction with the films' perceived disunity, or accusations of pretension and laziness. These are reasonable (though I will argue ultimately misguided) responses to the films' shocking elements. Rather, the problem is that more often than not, this response prefaces a wholesale dismissal of the films, resorting to a normative understanding of what constitutes "good" filmmaking, and precluding genuine engagement. Among these negative responses, even those that allow that the violence may on some level be an extension of the directors' concerns employ indignation as an excuse to disengage from pursuing the matter further.

An alternate, and more constructive lens through which critics and scholars have interpreted the violent shift of both *Twentynine Palms* and *Fat Girl* is the notion of genre. As will be explored shortly, the affective qualities of these films are often attributed to a shift or break in generic expectation. This plays out in criticism as a shocking discrepancy in what viewers anticipate as possible narrative outcomes, and the director's wilful breaching of these expectations.



## Generic expectations and generic breaks

Another means of making sense of the films' violence is the reading of them through a shift in generic framing. In specific reference to *Fat Girl*'s violent dénouement, Linda Ruth Williams has asserted, "This is a moment a little like the switch in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, when a genre shift occurs in the instant which divides frame from frame" ("*À ma soeur!*" 12). Roger Ebert likewise comments of its break with expectation: "There is a jolting surprise in discovering that this film has free will, and can end as it wants" ("*Fat Girl*"). And finally, J. Hoberman states that "*Fat Girl* is a female coming-of-age film that radically redefines its sentimental genre" when the film's "classical structure climaxes with a violent shift in rhetoric" ("The Flesh is Bleak").

David Denby of *The New Yorker* also points to Dumont's subversive project, describing *Twentynine Palms* along the same lines as the revisionist Western: "Dumont enters the mythical landscape of the American West, and what he creates is something like anti-myth" ("Feel the Earth"). Dumont, in turn, considers *Twentynine Palms* an "experimental horror film" ("Work Notes") and has signalled his intentions in subverting expectation:

What I'm criticising in *Twentynine Palms* is the power of American cinema. If you look at the way the film starts, the scenery and the actors indicate it's going to be an American-style movie, yet nothing happens, a great abyss opens up. As such, it's a negation of American cinema, almost a terrorist attack. (qtd. in Matheou "Fear at Ennui's End" 17)

In addition to this subversive intention, Dumont's self-conscious engagement with American genre cinema is evident in the film more explicitly. Several critics note the reference to Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) in the framing of Katia's murder, while the film also features strong echoes of *Duel* (Spielberg 1971), and *Deliverance* (Boorman 1972) in the redneck's vehicular pursuit and animalistic male rape scene respectively.<sup>40</sup>

Scholars have also interpreted the shift to violence in generic terms. Speaking of *Fat Girl*, and Breillat's later *Anatomy of Hell*, Lisa Coulthard states:

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<sup>40</sup> See: Archer "Beyond Anti-Americanism," Booth "'Twentynine Palms' Shocks Without Value," Coulthard "Uncanny Horrors," Hoberman "Lost Highway," Holden "Feral Essence of Living," Hughes "The New American Old West," Lübecker "Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*," Matheou "Fear at Ennui's End," Matheou "Vanishing Road," Patterson "The States We're In," Whipp "Pretentious and Pointless X 29."

Violence becomes what explicit sex might be in another text—the thing that derails the narrative, occupies a different diegetic and representational zone, and that element which, in one scene alone, can redefine a film’s genre. (“Desublimating Desire” 66)

Matine Beugnet similarly describes *Fat Girl* as playing out “like a slowed-down, out-of-sync version of a teen movie”<sup>41</sup> (*Cinema and Sensation* 48), before citing the film’s “sudden switch from teen movie to horror” (49).

For a similar turn to violence in its final minutes, Dumont’s *Twentynine Palms* has also been described in terms of genre subversion; Nickolaj Lübecker considers the film both a merging, and irritation of familiar frameworks:

this European art film combines elements from two of the genres most consistently explored by American film-makers: the road movie and the horror film. However, it is a road movie that goes nowhere, since the lovers return to the same motel every night, and a horror film that will frustrate all thrill-seeking viewers during the first 100 uneventful minutes. (Lübecker “Bruno Dumont’s *Twentynine Palms*” 238)

Similarly, Coulthard argues that the film’s conclusion “radically alters *Twentynine Palms*’ trajectory, generic tone, and impact” (“Uncanny Horrors” 171). According to Coulthard, its final twenty minutes are “from a register radically distinct” from the preceding hundred, as its violent conclusion “propels the film’s form away from its art cinematic origins into the realm of horror, cult, and genre cinemas” (172).

For these critics and scholars, a generic shift occurs in an isolatable instant in which our concerns and expectations radically change. Such an assessment involves finding the familiar elements which approximate our orientation on either side of this rupturing moment. And indeed it initially seems intuitive to examine the change occurring in these films through the lens of genre theory. Arising out of literary theory, genre criticism in film gained popularity in the mid 1960s and early 1970s,

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<sup>41</sup> Generically speaking, Beugnet’s employment of the term “teen movie” feels inaccurate for it seems to suggest the film not only depicts the teenage experience, but is aimed at teenagers. While Peter Sobczynski has noted the film’s premise—a challenge between two adolescents to see who can lose their virginity first—“sounds like the set-up for a romp not unlike ‘American Pie,’” the film shares more in common with coming-of-age dramas like *My Summer of Love* (Pawlikowski 2004) and *Fish Tank* (Arnold 2009).

out of dissatisfaction with auteur-centred approaches to understanding Hollywood cinema which many regarded as subject to such industrial constraint and interference as to deem questions of authorship problematic (Gledhill 252). As Tom Ryall argues in his influential article for *Screen* in 1970, genre criticism should be concerned with understanding the “relationship between art product, its source and its audience” (23). Crucially, this has involved questions pertaining to the creation and subversion of expectations on the part of viewers, through the examination of “repetitions and variations between films” (Gledhill 253).<sup>42</sup>

An important precursor to genre criticism in film came from the literary theory of Hans Robert Jauss, who described “the horizon of expectation.” This is the theory that readers bring expectations with them to texts that help shape their response, in opposition to the notion that texts are approached and evaluated as autonomous objects (Leitch 1547). In *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, Jauss states:

The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and “rules of the game” familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced. Variation, extension, and correction determine the latitude of a generic structure; a break with the convention on the one hand mere reproduction on the other determines its boundaries. (88)

Thus for Jauss, the making of meaning is a reciprocal process between reader and text; readers bring their own assumptions based on past experience with similar works, but texts also have the potential to expand these expectations through innovation. Such a dynamic is evident to have

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<sup>42</sup> My discussion of genre theory will be limited to the creation and breaching of expectations. Of course genre theory is far more complex and multifaceted than I have scope to explore here. Important founding works of genre theory in film include: Robert Warshow’s essays “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” first published in 1948, and “The Westerner,” in 1954 (republished in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*), André Bazin’s essays “The Western, or the American Film par Excellence” and “The Evolution of the Western,” first published in the 1950s, as well as Jim Kitses’s *Horizons West* published in 1969, and Colin McCarthur’s *Underworld USA* in 1972. Tom Ryall’s claim for genre criticism—to investigate the “relationship between art product, its source and its audience” (23)—also provides a very broad overview for how genre criticism has varied in approaches; concerns with the art product as primary in the creation of genre might privilege repeated elements, or iconography as a means to define and distinguish genre categories (see Alloway *Violent America*, Buscombe “The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema,” McCarthur *Underworld USA*) or structural repetitions in narrative (see Kitses *Horizons West*, Rubinfield *Bound to Bond*, Wright *Sixguns & Society*). Approaches concerned with the source of the product tend to privilege industrial factors and concerns about ideology (see Altman *The American Film Musical*, Wright “Genre Films and the Status Quo,” Wasko “The Political Economy of Film”); whereas approaches interested in audience have included the ritual approach which is concerned with the audience as a pivotal force in shaping film content through demand (see Cawelti *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, McConnell *The Spoken Seen* and Wood *America in the Movies*). Other approaches still have attempted to create a more totalising account of genre (see Altman *Film/Genre* and Neale *Genre*). Just as genre is notoriously difficult to define, there is often overlap between the concerns of these approaches. For an overview of film genre criticism see: Gledhill “History of Genre Criticism: Introduction,” Friedman et. al. *An Introduction to Film Genres*, Hayward “Genre/ Sub-genre,” Stadler and McWilliam “Genre.”

influenced the early film genre theory. Robert Warshow describes the necessary balance between familiarity and difference in his 1948 article on the gangster film:

For such a type to be successful means that its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become the accepted vehicles of a particular set of attitudes and a particular aesthetic effect. One goes to any individual example of the type with very definite expectations, and originality is to be welcomed only in the degree that it intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it. (*The Immediate Experience* 129-30)

Likewise, Tom Ryall's 1970 *Screen* article "The Notion of Genre" argues that "A crucial notion in any definition of genre, must be that the genre film is one which exhibits a relationship with other examples of the genre" (26). Implicit in this figuration, however, is an awareness of this dynamic, both by the filmmaker and the audience (26).

While filmmakers have long played with audience expectation and awareness of genre conventions in the creation of hybrid genres, significantly, neither *Fat Girl* nor *Twentynine Palms* is an example of genre hybridisation. Unlike the werewolf as puberty metaphor that binds the horrific with the ordinary in John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000), for example, *Fat Girl*'s genres clash rather than combine. Regarding the shift at play in generic terms seems a logical conclusion to draw in light of the film's manipulation of expectation. To borrow from Warshow, as viewers we welcome innovation as long as it does not upset our fundamental expectations of generic experience (*The Immediate Experience* 30). Similarly, if we take the majority of *Twentynine Palms* to be a drama about the romantic trials of a dysfunctional couple in the desert, the sudden arrival of a truck full of violent strangers is unlikely to be on what Jauss calls our "horizon of expectations," whereas in horror film it might well be.

Both *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* have an interesting relationship with genre and its subversion, however scholarly interest in the troubling of genre expectation has also extended to the greater trend of new extreme cinema. On the one hand genre is considered as a kind of safety net, insulating the viewer's experience by affording particular cues as guidance. Asbjørn Grønstad invokes the generic cues in horror films such as *Saw* (Wan 2004) and *Hostel* (Roth 2005) both as having a fortifying quality against genuine discomfort, and as a defining difference from his corpus of "unwatchable" films:

The spectator may cringe in horror at outlandish scenes of torture, and she might become nauseated, but the fact remains that the discomfort-inducing images in this case are already rendered ineffective by their generic context... In the *Saw* franchise, aesthetic form works to render unpleasurable sensations paradoxically pleasurable; in the cinema of the unwatchable unpleasure stays unpleasurable. (*Screening* 15-16)

While I find “ineffective” to be an overstatement, I tend to agree with this line of reasoning, having argued in previous chapters (though not in generic terms) that the affective potential of violent representation can in part be attributed to the absence of rhetorical cues or the dramatic treatment we would otherwise expect. Grønstad’s point, however, does give rise to an alternate argument that warrants consideration.

We might, for example, consider the breaking of expectation to be part of the expansion of genre, or revitalisation of tired genres with new elements. Tzvetan Todorov proffers such a claim in his 1978 work *Genres in Discourse*: “The fact that a work ‘disobeys’ its genre does not mean that the genre does not exist” (14). Rather, Todorov argues the opposite, for the breaking of a rule requires first that there is a rule to be broken. Furthermore, he argues that “the norm” can only be recognised in relation to its transgression (14), an idea iterated much earlier in his study of the fantastic as a literary genre (*The Fantastic* 8). Geoff King notes this kind of breaching of expectations as innovation in his study of American independent cinema, in a spectrum ranging from the complication of genre to its undermining. However, even at its most subversive, the undermining of genre described by King is still of a different order to that in Dumont’s and Breillat’s films. Warhol and Morrissey’s *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), for example, undermines the Western with both a queer sensibility and intentional anachronism, but King argues the directors’ recognisable style supersedes even its genre, in a kind of intrusive auteurism (189-90).

Again, in the films of this chapter, the undermining of genre feels more acute—in the way Williams argues that *Fat Girl*’s shift can be isolated “in the instant which divides frame from frame” (“*À ma soeur!*” 12). Further, while *Twentynine Palms* and *Fat Girl* certainly engage with genre, to suggest that they “disobey” those genres is probably overstating the allegiance of this engagement. As Beugnet states, while directors of the French “cinema of sensation” (in which she includes Breillat and Dumont amongst others), “often draw on and subvert generic elements, the end result is neither predefined by the narrative or discursive operations of genre” (*Cinema and Sensation* 125).

As this chapter has been arguing, while these films do feature shifts, and it might be intuitive to interpret these shifts in generic terms, doing so strictly in this way does not go far enough to explain their relationship to disturbing affect. Robert Rodriguez's *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) for example, also features a dramatic shift in generic expectation with its marked transition from crime film to vampire film, however, this shift, while unexpected, produces a very different affect to the disturbing affect being described here. The change from crime to vampire genre does not bring with it a dramatic shift in the emotional landscape of the film; unlike *Fat Girl*'s last minute move from the relatively benign trials of adolescence to a confrontation with a homicidal maniac, *From Dusk Till Dawn*'s world is fraught with danger from the outset. With the capture of the film's central family by criminals early in the narrative, we have already witnessed the danger of being held captive by murderous forces; the change in genre simply sees the source of this threat relocated into a supernatural realm. Further, the film maintains a darkly comic tone throughout which works to offset what might otherwise be genuinely unsettling moments. Finally, in contrast to the films in this chapter, which align with approximations of genre, *From Dusk Till Dawn* both firmly takes on the conventions of its respective genres, and for comedic value, self-reflexively acknowledges the absurdity of this shift, as in one of the criminal's assertions: "And I don't want to hear anything about 'I don't believe in vampires' because *I* don't believe in vampires, but I believe in my own two eyes, and what *I* saw is fucking vampires!"

Because Rodriguez's film offers an alternate example of what a generic shift to horror might look like, it does not follow that we equate such shifts *a priori* with disturbing affect. In terms of accounting for disturbing affect, the question of genre becomes to some extent subsidiary, as this affect cannot be isolated as intrinsic to the shift itself. For this reason, drawing on the work of Deborah Thomas and George M. Wilson, I want to suggest an alternate approach to these films that is not constrained to genre categories. I find attending to the films' broader structures better suited to account for the sudden turns to violence and examining its affective power.

### **Orientation beyond genre**

Outlined above is what I take to be critical misunderstandings of the shifts occurring in *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms*. Quandt's articulation of the anxiety felt at the aggressive excess of Dumont's film bespeaks a critical imperative to dismiss the films as, at best, the minor glitch in the career of otherwise respectable artists or, at worst, a deplorable and pretentious excursion into shock for shock's sake. Alternate explanations that focus on a shift in genre, while more productive,

necessarily rely on an exaggerated sense of the directors' engagement with generic convention. Further, neither of these approaches can be sufficiently extrapolated to explain disturbing affect.

This misunderstanding of jarring moments strikes me as being more akin to the issues of perspective described by George M. Wilson in his study of cinematic point of view. Wilson's understanding of point of view is particularly relevant to the films in this chapter, as he argues that moments of narration that initially appear incoherent can often be better understood by realigning our perspective. To explain, Wilson describes a perspectival phenomenon in painting:

When the perspective focus of a painting is located within the frame but at a significant distance from the picture's horizontal midpoint, spectators are tempted to place themselves at a suitable position at the opposite side of the painting so that they create for themselves the impression of facing directly into the receding space of the focal point... The lateral focus becomes *the* perceptual node around which the other spatial elements and relationships are configured rather than, as it was meant to be, a dynamic accent subordinate to patterns whose salience is visible only from a centred position before the canvas. (*Narration in Light* 10)

Wilson argues such a tendency also applies to certain complex narrative films, whereby our concentration on the narrative's resolution is misplaced. While focussing one's attention on the progression of the story is the invitation of most narrative films, there are films in which "central aspects of their interest and significance bear only an *oblique* relationship to the forms of dramatic closure they employ" (10). Wilson argues:

The problem for the viewer of such a film is to locate a "centered position" from which the oblique strands of narrational strategy can come together in a configuration that reorganizes his or her perception and comprehension of the fictional events. There is no set of rules for achieving such a position, but a just appreciation of fruitful questions about point of view can do a lot to shift one's angle of perception toward a more fortunate perspective. (11)

It is this kind of realignment I propose will better equip us to make sense of the rupturing moments of violence in *Fat Girl* and *Twenty-nine Palms*. Wilson's method for a recalibrated perspective is a detailed consideration of a film's method of narration in terms of point of view. I will return to this shortly, but for now I want to elaborate on the still broader concept of "orientation," to which point of view is an important element. In order to do this, I will draw on Deborah Thomas's work in *Beyond Genre*. While both Thomas and Wilson focus predominantly on Hollywood cinema, their

approaches translate to other kinds of cinema and, more importantly, provide the vocabulary necessary to account for the aesthetic device at play in *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms*.

Thomas's work on film orientation operates on the premise that our expectations for the experience a film will elicit "go beyond genre" (*Beyond Genre* 9). Describing the way her body adjusts to the presumed experience to follow, bracing herself for some films, and relaxing in preparation for others, Thomas states:

What's involved here is an extremely broad anticipation of the kinds of pleasure to be offered or withheld and the kinds of narrative world I'll be invited to inhabit, not in terms of precise settings and events, but in terms of the ways they are experienced by viewers and, to some extent, by the central characters: on the one hand, there are narrative worlds that feel repressive and full of danger and, on the other, those that feel more benevolent and safe. Settling down to watch a film is, crucially, a case of getting in the mood for the sort of film one is about to watch. (9)

For Thomas, these divisions between malevolence and safety can be charted onto the wider distinction between comedic and the melodramatic registers. Specifically this distinction is between categories that fundamentally go beyond genre, rather than constituting genres themselves. These categories are both structures—each have their own tendencies to organise narrative space in particular ways—and "ways of being a genre film," in the sense that *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks 1971) and *The Searchers* (Ford 1956) are both Westerns, operating in alternate registers (12). Significantly, Thomas argues, individual films often oscillate between the comedic and the melodramatic, while "A film's generic identity, on the other hand, tends to be more stable: a Western generally remains a Western all the way through" (14). Of course the criticism cited earlier as to a generic approach to the violent shifts in Breillat's and Dumont's films seems at odds with this: proposing a radical shift in genre is indeed possible. However, as has already been argued, while such an explanation is applicable to a film like *From Dusk Till Dawn*, it is somewhat misleading in the case of *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms*. While these films engage with generic elements, they do not embrace convention as ardently. It therefore seems illfitting to assume they should be beholden to genre conventions in the same way.

Thomas's analyses of films that oscillate between comedic and melodramatic registers are illuminating in their sensitivity to subtle shifts—the function of comedy in the first hour of



Spielberg's otherwise harrowing *Schindler's List* (1993), for example. Such a process can be thought of in terms of expansion and contraction, as one type of orientation grows the other dissipates. Further, where one orientation is clearly dominant, the other may arise but is generally muted. For instance, Thomas describes the way "comedic films seem to have to strive continually to keep melodrama at bay" (21); melodramatic characters may appear, however, they are necessarily cast out of the narrative "if its comedic climate is to be preserved" (21).

In contrast to the shifts in orientation Thomas describes, those that occur in films like *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* feel less like subtle fluctuations, and more like pronounced breaks. Where Thomas traces the gradual expansion and contraction of the comedic in *Schindler's List*, the films in this chapter contain shifts so definitive as to preclude a reversion to the status quo. Despite being able to clearly isolate the moment of rupture in *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms*, I want to redirect critical focus to a more detailed consideration of the context in which these moments sit. While both films orientate the viewer in one direction for the greater part of their duration and then suddenly disorientate them in their final minutes, I argue that their capacity for disturbing affect is not contingent on the shift itself as an unsettling device. Rather, this affect can be accounted for in an examination of the films' broader patterns of orientation, that is, the worlds we are invited to inhabit and the nature of this invitation (Thomas *Beyond Genre* 9). I will argue that it is through these patterns of orientation that the pull/ push dynamic is effected, contingent on the nature of our involvement, and that by observing the films' structures in this way, we are able to consider their potential for disturbing affect. By taking this approach in trying to understand the sudden violence of these films, we might, as Wilson puts it, achieve "a more fortunate perspective" (*Narration in Light* 11).

Granted, these shifts are not, as with Thomas's study, between the comedic and the melodramatic—both films operate primarily within a melodramatic register, but, as I will argue of Breillat's film at least, the shifts seem rather to happen between levels of the melodramatic (the extent to which we interpret the world to be malevolent, and where this malevolence is likely to spring from). I will extend Thomas's thinking to establish a sub-distinction that I take to be crucial to understanding our involvement in these films specifically. Breillat's film, I argue, develops a register of proximity through its aesthetic treatment of the everyday as indeterminate, in stark contrast to *Twentynine Palms* which provides a resolutely negative conception while holding us at a distance throughout. Before turning to the films themselves, this chapter will briefly sketch out two important elements

in Thomas's articulation of the way film worlds orient us—the structuring of space in melodramatic films, and the significance of point of view—as these will prove essential to the following analysis of *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms*. I will then signal my own addition to these elements—namely the function of language—which pertains less to melodramatic films generally, but which is important to the films in this chapter specifically.

As mentioned earlier, for Thomas, the broad categories of the comedic and melodramatic can in part be understood structurally; each has a tendency to arrange narrative space in contrasting ways. Melodramatic films, Thomas argues, tend to throw into tension a social space, and an alternate space “where social values and expectations to some extent break down” (*Beyond Genre* 13). This might be the difference between the domestic home and the wilderness, as in *The Searchers*, or the collapsing fascist regime in the village of Salò versus the specialised space of the libertine's mansion in Pasolini's film, for example. While it is common for films to only depict one of these spaces, “both remain implicit points of reference for the melodramatic, and their relationship constitutes its characteristic structure” (14). This is the case for both *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms*; throughout both films we are located firmly within the “alternate space” (*Fat Girl*'s seaside vacation setting, *Twentynine Palms*'s desert road trip) where the “social space” of home/work remains a peripheral point of reference, referred to but never seen. As will be shown, this contrast between the alternate spaces on screen and the distant space of social normality becomes important in our varying orientations towards *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms*, in respect to their registers of proximity and distance.

Another key factor for Thomas in describing a film's orienting structure is the point of view we are encouraged to take. Notably, this is not a question of our identifying with a particular character. Rather, Thomas speaks of point of view in relation to the degree of access we are granted both to the assorted spaces of the narrative, and to the characters that negotiate these spaces (19):

a film's point of view is clearly not reducible to that of the characters—or even a privileged character—within it, but includes an attitude or orientation towards the various characters (whether one of ironic detachment, sympathetic involvement, moral condemnation, or whatever) as well as some sort of epistemological relationship which is never precisely one of identity (where we see and know precisely what they do, nothing more nor less), and a spatial positioning which is not identical to theirs. (20)

In addition to Thomas's description here, Wilson's study of cinematic point of view is useful in unpacking this complex subject. For Wilson, our epistemic relation to a film is vital. Primarily this involves questions pertaining to "the different ways in which a form of narration can systematically structure an audience's overall epistemic access to narrative" (*Narration in Light* 3). Put simply, Wilson is concerned with how narrative is structured in order to regulate the level of knowledge we possess about characters and the world they inhabit (what he calls "epistemic authority"); how we attain this knowledge—differentiating between events directly presented and inferences drawn ("epistemic reliability"); and the extent to which both common sense and prior understanding of narrative conventions are applicable to understanding individual films ("epistemic distance") (4-5).

To illustrate, there is a vast difference in our point of view on the worlds and characters depicted in Klimov's *Come and See*, and Haneke's *The Seventh Continent*, for example. The former grants us such privileged access to Florya's experience that at times we share parts of his sensory perception, as in the soundtrack's temporary distortion to simulate his damaged hearing. Florya's gradual absorption of the world's horrors is harrowing to watch, for his naïveté and good will encourage a sympathetic involvement from the outset. That said, however, the at times expressionist quality of the *mise-en-scène* suggests our relation to the world and to other characters is imbued with Florya's own emotional response. Haneke's film, by contrast, as explored in the previous chapter, deliberately frustrates our understanding of the world, by gesturing towards, but consistently withholding access to the interiority of its inhabitants. In this instance, Haneke encourages us to draw inferences as to character motivation, yet the gaps between what is directly presented and what we can reasonably infer are so great that any conclusive interpretation is unreliable. Like the varied treatment of the alternate versus social space outlined by Thomas, the nuances of differing points of view in *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* play a crucial role in their orientation, and subsequent capacity for disturbing affect.

Finally, I want to signal what I take to be a key thread of concern to the registers of orientation in the films in this chapter specifically—the varying functions of language. While this may seem an odd thread to pull, it is by no means arbitrary; both *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* signal their concern with language—most explicitly in their inclusion of romantic couples who struggle to communicate, but also in more subtle ways. With regard to *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* specifically, I argue the films' treatment of language is just as important to discerning the varying

registers of orientation (proximity and distance respectively) as Thomas's articulation of spatial structures and point of view in the melodramatic narrative.

### *Twentynine Palms*

I have already signalled the tendency in negative reviews of *Twentynine Palms* to regard the film's turn to violence as illegible in relation to the rest of the film. This charge, more often than not, precedes the wholesale dismissal of the film as both lazy and pretentious. While I have argued that such a dismissal precludes consideration of what is interesting about *Twentynine Palms*, I now want to call for a reappraisal of this stance which I believe to be fundamentally misguided. Before detailing my argument, I want to gesture towards a scene that should make us sceptical of criticism that cannot reconcile the ending with the rest of the film.<sup>43</sup>

Early in *Twentynine Palms*, a scene begins with a slow, night time panning shot of an alleyway repeatedly illuminated by the bright bulb flashes of an off-screen photographer. The distant murmur of (police?) radio can be heard amidst the overbearing sound of traffic that dominates throughout the film. Katia's voice then emanates from a place seemingly behind the camera, beginning a brief conversation about the couple's plans for dinner. Coinciding with the end of this exchange we see that the camera has done a full circle, and we are viewing the alleyway a second time. Katia's voice is heard again: "C'est toujours pareil ce truc-là" ["That thing's always the same"]. At this point we cut to a wider shot which provides us with the context necessary to see that the alleyway we have been watching is not a place the characters currently inhabit but a looped panorama playing on a television screen in the couple's motel. Another cut reveals the reverse angle, David is sprawled out in bed transfixed by the screen; Katia sits beside him in a towel painting her nails. "Mais qu'est-ce que c'est ça?" ["But what is it?"] She asks. David responds: "Je ne sais pas. Je pense..." ["I don't know. I think..."] And then, reverting to an affected English midsentence, "an art film." He pauses before matter-of-factly adding, "It's amazing."

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<sup>43</sup> Where dialogue is incorporated in my analysis of *Twentynine Palms* I will include both the spoken French, and its English translation in order to illustrate the clash of languages which is integral to the couple's dynamic. It is also to show the significance of points at which the couple's arguments turn from French to English, usually when David, the American character becomes frustrated. Please note that my analysis of *Fat Girl* lists only the English translation of its French speaking characters as this dynamic of alternating languages is not present.

Unless we are familiar with the source material (Thomas Demand's 2001 video art *Yard*<sup>44</sup>), we could be forgiven for assuming this is a point of view shot through David's camera, taking photos while Katia talks to him off-screen. We have, after all, been told in the opening scene that David's purpose for driving to Twentynine Palms is to scout locations, presumably for a video or photography project. Dumont plays a bit of a joke on us here: David is not working as we are led to assume, but lazing in bed. In fact, throughout the film we never see him take any photos or shoot any footage. We do however see him twice more in similar scenes, naked, save for a sheet or towel engrossed by the motel television. More importantly, however, this scene gestures towards the theme of monotonous repetition which will structure the entire film: it reflexively acknowledges itself as part of a larger art film, one that is always the same with its repetitive cycle of explicit sex and pointless quarrels.

My point here is that we should not be so quick to dismiss the frustration and monotony of Dumont's film as apathy or pretension, as it is, in fact, carefully calculated. At the very least, this scene should make us question the seriousness of any perceived pretension. Further, as this analysis will show, the culminating violence which so troubled critics is not the incongruous misstep it has been claimed to be; if we find a "centred viewpoint" we can see that it arises out of the film's structuring orientation of alienating repetition—acknowledged in this scene, and fundamental to negative conceptions of the everyday.

*Twentynine Palms* is patterned by alienation and repetition in various ways. This is perhaps most evident in the film's concern with language as both banal and the stuff of conflict. Lines of dialogue are frequently repeated and the film's central couple are plagued by miscommunication; Katia (played by native Russian Yekaterina Golubeva) speaks French, while David is American, and both have only a cursory grip on the other's language. At numerous points in the film their relationship to each other and the outside world is fraught by a labour to communicate. However, language is just part of a greater vocabulary of replication that patterns the film—symbols of repetition are featured throughout, and the wider structure, until its violent dénouement, consists of scenes of either/ or in combination: driving, arguing, reconciling, and having sex. In order to explore this

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Demand is a German artist who works in a range of mediums. His video art, specifically, is often concerned with repetition and themes of latent violence in the banal. His 2001 work *Escalator*, for example, is a stop motion animation looped recording of an escalator made out of paper. Aside from its repetition and ordinariness, it is also a recreation of actual surveillance footage from a London escalator in Charing Cross which was the scene of a murder. Similarly, Demand's 1999 piece *Tunnel* is both a looped shot of a driver's perspective driving through a white pillared tunnel (created from paper), but also a reference to the scene of Princess Diana's death (Heiser "Pulp Fiction").

structuring, I want to focus on how language functions, along with Thomas's concepts of point of view and the structuring division of social and alternate space, to alienate us from the world of Dumont's film, establishing an orienting structure of distance.

The first words we hear in *Twentynine Palms* are Japanese, emanating from the Hummer's stereo as the opening chord of a playfully upbeat song (one we will hear several times throughout the film) is strummed and a country music style guitar twangs into life. The film opens on the road, a broad and busy highway, and we watch David's back as he drives. David indicates, leaning forward to look in his side mirror (an act that seems to require his whole body), letting out a frustrated groan at the traffic. Resigning himself to the present lane, he shuffles, reaching into his pocket and removing a roll of red tape with which he proceeds to wrap a strip around the steering wheel (possibly to measure the vehicle's over-steer), and then fidgets with something, CDs perhaps, on the seat beside him, his attention darting back and forth between this distraction and the road ahead. David is introduced as restless and childlike—he groans, shuffles, fumbles and fidgets. A cut takes us to a similarly unflattering first glimpse of Katia, asleep with mouth agape in the back seat. Moments later she is awoken by David's mobile phone which he fumbles to answer. "Hello? Hello. I'm driving." David sighs tiredly, licks his lips and purses them; even the muscles of his face seem impatient. "I'm driving to Twentynine Palms."

The opening scene's phone call serves as exposition of the plot—David explains he is going to "check out the location"—but it is also our introduction to the way language functions as repetitive and banal. We see this again shortly after, when the couple pull over to admire a wind farm. Initially it is obscured by an extensive freight train: we watch its long line of carriages pulse rhythmically over the tracks before the couple approach the dozens of synchronised turbines that litter the horizon. Staring up in awe, David says, "It's great" and implores Katia to listen to the endless cyclic whirl. "C'est magnifique" ["It's fantastic"] she replies. "Oui," ["Yes"] David splutters, taken aback as though her response is inadequate before adding, "No, it's perfect." Where the first scene introduces language as repetitive, this scene, replete with symbols of perpetuity, emphasises its redundancy; the couple's relay of interchangeable adjectives does not advance understanding, it merely replicates.

David and Katia's frequent arguments, the first of which occurs less than ten minutes into the film, are similarly structured by repetition. In the scene immediately following the wind farm, the couple are back in the car driving. I will quote the argument at length to illustrate the monotony and redundancy of the exchange. Taking David's hand, and speaking softly, Katia asks, "Pourquoi tu penses?" ["What are you thinking?"].<sup>45</sup> David responds flatly: "Je pense à rien." ["I'm thinking about nothing."] Katia's voice is still light, but pressing: "Si, tu penses quelque chose" ["You're thinking something."] "Non, rien" ["No, nothing"] David replies. Katia pushes again, "Ça c'est pas vrai" ["That's not true"]. Beginning to lose his patience, David shrugs his shoulders, retorting: "C'est vrai!" ["It's true!"]. Katia's voice is slightly harsher now, "Mais pourquoi tu ne peux pas me dire?" ["But why can't you tell me?"] Exasperated now, David reverts to his native tongue, "I'm driving. What?" In frustration he throws up the hand she was holding, and lets out a heavy sigh as she pulls away. Looking up at her, he asks "Quoi?" ["What?"] But the word drawls out with his annoyance, emphasising his American accent. The scene continues and ends without resolution, David trying repeatedly to coax a response out of Katia whose features we study in long take, shifting from silent anger to hysterical crying. Like the tautological exchange about the wind farm, this argument is patterned by fruitless repetition.

Michel Chion comments on a similarly repetitive patterning of dialogue—what he refers to as "parroting"—in his monograph on Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). In Kubrick's film, parroting has a variety of functions, but generally gives language a detached presence. "When we hear the words we can never assume that their meaning is entirely transparent, or that they are clearly concealing some precise meaning that is different from what they say" (Chion 24). This overt use of repetitive dialogue in *Eyes Wide Shut* contributes to the film's enigmatic tone, characters often repeating the lines of others with a paranoid uncertainty that makes familiar words strange. In this sense, parroting in Kubrick's film often opens language up to the possibility of multiple meanings. Dumont's use of repetitive dialogue in *Twentynine Palms*, by contrast, shuts meaning down. Katia and David's exchanges emphasise language as banal and trivial. When the characters fail to understand each other, it is not indicative of some deeper or vital meaning. Rather, their arguments function like a tennis match: words are served and returned, first in their affirmative terms, then their mirroring negative, corresponding with the film's wider pendulation between disputes and resolutions.

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<sup>45</sup> This translates literally to "Why are you thinking?"—an example of Katia's sometimes poor French. Her accent too, oscillates between French and Russian, making her at times difficult to understand.

This tennis match pattern of conversation is repeated *par excellence* in a later argument in which David grows increasingly frustrated with Katia's contradictory behaviour. Sat at a café, Katia declares she is starving, before requesting ice cream instead of a meal. David is further confused when the conversation turns to the subject of a marine sat at another table, Katia stating that she finds marines attractive but should David ever shave his head like one she would leave him. This mild confusion soon transforms into frustration and anger, however:

David: (referring to Katia's ice cream) "C'est bon?" ["Is it good?"]

Katia: "C'est pas bon." ["It's not good."] (Pause) "Mais c'est bon." ["But it's good."]

David: "Ah non. Je ne comprends pas. Hein, tu dis des choses que je ne comprends pas." ["Ah no. I don't understand. Uh, you say things that I don't understand."]

Katia: "Mais il n'y a rien à comprendre." ["There's nothing to understand."]

David (dismissive): "Bon." ["Fine."]

Katia: "Bon." ["Fine."] (Pause) "Tu fais la gueule?" ["Are you sulking?"]

David: "Non, je ne fais pas la gueule." ["No, I'm not sulking."]

Katia: "Ah oui tu fais la gueule." ["Yes, you are sulking."]

David, exasperated, bursts into rapid fire English: "You know I'd just like to have our conversations to have some sort of logic to 'em because sometimes you say one thing then you say something else and I have no idea what you're saying, this completely dysfunctional conversation, and I, I don't know-"

Katia smiles: "Je t'aime." ["I love you."]

She laughs softly, disarming him.

David stares at her, before returning: "J'ai envie de toi." ["I want you."]

The scene ends as the couple leave the café, arms around one another, before a cut transports us immediately to a shot of them in the middle of vigorous sex back in their motel room.

Even the gentle words spoken between the couple feel vapid in the context of their predictable and perpetual fighting. "Est-ce que tu es content de commencer ton repérage?" ["Are you happy to start scouting?"] Katia asks David in the Chinese restaurant. David responds softly and slowly, "Je suis heureux...être ici...avec toi" ["I'm happy...to be here...with you"] before looking up at her with puppy dog eyes several times as though waiting for her approval. Seconds later the couple erupt into argument, language dissolving as Katia quietly seethes in response to David's fleeting glance at another woman. Unable to contain her anger any longer, Katia eventually smashes at the table with her fist in an involuntary gesture of inarticulate rage. Vitriol between the couple is so frequent, and Katia's moods so unpredictable, that moments of calm merely leave us in wait of the next dispute.



I point to these scenes as indicative of both the way the patterning of language (as repetitive—oscillating between positive and negative poles) reflects the greater patterning of the film's structure, but also to indicate that in *Twentynine Palms* it is a frustrating abstraction of communication, obstructive to understanding. In the aforementioned Chinese restaurant scene, we hear a chaotic cacophony of maladroit attempts at one another's languages (this time the broken English of a Chinese waitress is thrown into the mix). I want to suggest that Dumont's repetitions in language gesture towards a negative conception of the everyday as not only repetitive, but inconsequential. The couple's interactions remain superficial and constrained; it seems the creative potential in ostensibly oppressive and predetermined structures as described by Michel De Certeau is patently absent. The repetitions of language in *Twentynine Palms* neither signal something deeper (as in *Eyes Wide Shut*), nor do they advance understanding. Rather the couple's words give the sense of being trapped in a frustrated and tautological cycle.

As described in negative conceptions of the everyday, the alienating patterns of repetition require transcendence or escape if the authentic is to be accessible, and this too plays out in *Twentynine Palms*'s treatment of language as an abstraction that must collapse. Indeed Dumont's film seems to strive towards the dissolution of language. Notably, the couple's arguments tend to dissolve into silence—Katia fumes silently before bursting into tears, David sulks. Where words constantly trip and fail, effective communication in *Twentynine Palms* seems to occur through the primitive and corporeal—physical aggression and sex. As Dumont has said in interview, “the couple are regressing precisely in their lack of awareness, of verbal language, everything that we think of as human and civilized—to try and revert to some instinctual state” (qtd. in Béar 277).

This regressive turn away from language is emphasised in the couple's frequent sexual encounters. Where Katia is prone to unpredictable emotional outbursts, often radically disproportionate to any given situation, David seems driven by his body, most obviously in a consistent pursuit of sex. We are encouraged to view him in corporeal terms—his shift in the argument cited above from the language of emotion in Katia's “I love you,” to the bodily “I want you” is demonstrative. David's corporeality is also strongly associated with the animal. In one scene following an argument, the couple swim in the motel swimming pool; face half immersed in the water, David stalks Katia like a crocodile before initiating fierce sex which culminates in his animal-like orgasmic squeals. The couple's (often aggressive) sex seems to be their only successful means of communicating with one another. Significantly, these scenes tend to culminate in David's primal screams, grunts, and howls.

In this sense, sex brings the dissolution of language, becoming animal; David and Katia connect on corporeal terms, which are terms that transcend language.

Beyond these extremes between David's bodily drive, and Katia's hysterical emotions, language fails to give us any real insight into their characters; rather their dialogue remains superficial. In terms of Thomas's division between social and alternate spaces, we barely glimpse the social space of home. The expository phone call in the film's opening scene is the closest we get to an insight into the characters' existence outside of this alternate space, and this remains resolutely surface—David is driving to the desert to scout locations, he will be back in a couple of days. With only the vaguest of references to the world they have left, our epistemic access to character is strictly limited to what we see and hear in their present tense, and illustrated in the banality and repetition of their conversations this hardly gives us any insight as to who these characters are or what their existence entails outside of their immediate context.

This lack of access to character also impacts the landscape they inhabit. Not afforded a sense of the world they have come from, the desert space remains relatively neutral; it is neither figured as a space of liberating escape, nor does it inspire a longing for home. Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) provides a contrasting example. The film follows the murderous escapades of lovers Mickey and Mallory Knox as they travel across America. The alternate space of the road is depicted as liberating in contrast to the domestic sphere they have left. Insight is provided in a highly stylised subjective flashback as Mallory reminisces about how the couple met, Mickey rescuing Mallory from her sexually abusive father. Similarly, Greg McLean's *Wolf Creek* (2005), which charts the journey of three youths to outback Australia, remains in the immediate context of their road trip, yet insight as to the friends' relationships and lives outside of the present moment are provided in conversations and interactions that deepen our understanding of character. The world of *Twentynine Palms* feels hermetically sealed by comparison. Rather than there being tension between the social and alternate space, they feel like completely separate worlds. Dumont consistently holds us at a distance, positioning us as observers to the couple's habitual sliding between poles of animosity and tenderness.

Bereft of any genuine warmth or opportunities for attachment to the characters and their world, Dumont estranges us; Katia and David are framed as creatures for our observation, a perception

writ large in the repeated extreme long shots that diminish them. Dumont's camera often encourages us to view his characters at great distance, becoming mere shapes in the ecology of magnificent landscapes. While this technique had been seen earlier in *Humanity*, like all of Dumont's authorial tropes, it is exaggerated in *Twentynine Palms*. Coupled with an unnaturally loud soundscape (traffic, sirens, wind, the pairs' footsteps, are all noticeably amplified) the film world often overwhelms the characters; evoking the sublime, Dumont's photography renders the couple diminutive against desert landscapes that are simultaneously beautiful and threatening. Beugnet describes the eeriness of this dynamic:

In a number of the sequences in *Twentynine Palms*, as in *L'Humanité*, the combination of the audio close-up and scope format thus effects a decentering of the human figure and, in a paradoxical reversal of scale, turns the desert into the vision of a monstrous entity on whose skin the characters seem to wander. (*Cinema and Sensation* 105)

Rendering the couple as minutiae against the sublime desert, Dumont presents his characters as trivial in an environment indifferent to them. This sense of alienation is exacerbated by both the couple's growing animosity towards each other, and an increasing antagonism of those around them. As the film progresses, the couple's arguments grow more serious (escalating to the point where David will wrestle Katia to the ground in the middle of a road and beat her), and it becomes apparent that they are capable of destroying each other. The potential threat of the outside world is further emphasised by its hostile inhabitants ranging from the petulant but benign waitress who snatches the couple's menus from them in the Chinese restaurant, to the truck full of rednecks who assault David and Katia in the film's violent ending.

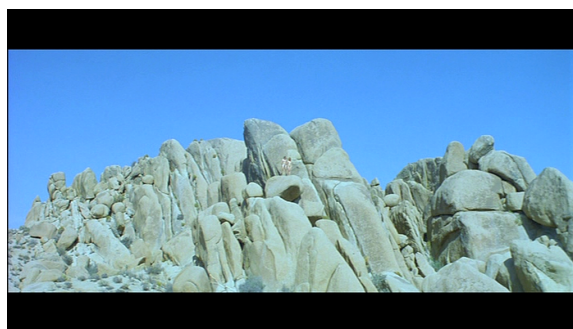


Fig. 25 – 26. Beautiful and overwhelming—the desert as sublime in *Twentynine Palms*

While the exact nature of this later attack may come as a surprise, Dumont punctuates the film with signals as to the world's enmity; midway through the film, David and Katia's attempt to cross the road without looking is met with the disproportionate aggression of a driver who screams abuse at them; after a heated night time argument in which David throws Katia out of the motel room she wanders up and down the stretch of road outside hiding twice from passing cars; on a desert drive the couple is passed by a blue pick up truck, Katia remarking "Tu vois comme on est pas tout seule?" ["You see, we're not alone"]; and minutes before they are attacked they will have two encounters with the attackers' vehicle, first while they are pulled over, it stops in front of them and then speeds off (David laughs but Katia voices her trepidation) then later when the couple's Hummer is stuck on a rocky trail, David spies it in the distance.

The couple are assaulted on what will be their final desert drive together; a white pick up truck they have spied earlier rams their Hummer at speed, forcing them to a halt. Three men pull David and Katia from the vehicle, one sporting a baseball bat. Katia is stripped naked and forced to watch while David is pushed to the ground and repeatedly beaten in the face with the bat before one of the men rapes him. David is incapacitated throughout; bloody and stunned, his mouth ajar in the sand expels a terrible croaking sound. Reminiscent of David's primal cries in the throes of orgasm, the rapist screams repeatedly upon climax, finally bursting into tears. A shot of Katia shows her gasping in rage and horror which gives way to hoarse cries.

The film's eruption of violence sees the culmination of its characters' and world's fundamental drive towards the dissolution of language. The final spasm of violence, David's murder of Katia, occurs in the predictable patterning of anger and calm that has structured the film throughout. After a tender moment in which Katia attempts to comfort David, his face hideously deformed in a swollen mass of blood and bruising, she returns to the motel room with a pizza to find David has locked himself in the bathroom. Sitting on the bed, Katia resigns herself to wait. After a time, David bursts naked from the bathroom screaming inarticulately. His already distorted features are rendered truly monstrous, having cut off his hair, bald save for sparse patches here and there. Leaping on top of Katia he repeatedly stabs her with a pair of scissors, his frenzied, animal screams pulsing rhythmically as he drives the blade downwards. In these bursts of violence the strain of miscommunication gives way to complete abandon in the couple's primal regression. The banality of tautological exchange, empty sentiment and pointless bickering dissolves into an inarticulate chaos of screams, cries, croaks, and groans.

After the murder, we cut to the film's final shot—a static, high angled extreme wide shot looking down at David's naked corpse in the desert. In long take we watch the attending police offer pace the scene, arguing through his radio with a colleague before he all but disappears, walking into the distance. The officer's language is replete with generic cliché, uttering phrases including: "Guy looks like he's been through a meat grinder, man."/ "I don't want this to turn into a spectator show,"/ and "Get your ass off the phone, stop talking to your wife, and get me somebody out here now!" This rhetoric is almost laughable for its performative ineptitude, like the clichéd sentiment of David's earlier, "I'm happy...to be here...with you." It is, however, entirely fitting, in keeping with the film's rendering of language as both surface and ineffectual. Reinforcing our position as alienated observers, this shot illustrates a world that persists without David and Katia, a world still characterised by miscommunication and conflict.



Fig. 27. The earth abides—the final shot in *Twentynine Palms*

Adjusting our perception to see the final violence as part of a greater pattern of repetitive animosity, it is in fact inevitable from the outset that something grievous should happen. Far from an incongruous rupture, or directorial misstep, the violence of the film's ending is the natural corollary of violence threatened throughout. The couple, and the world they inhabit bristles with tension; a frustrated inability to communicate with one another sees any kind of affection turn to self-destructive rage. Further, Dumont's scope vision landscape seems ready to swallow them at any given moment, and the inimical locals form a gradually encroaching presence. The film itself has a feeling of pent up energy that needs to be worked out in the frequent fights and ferocious sex. Its repetitive patterning of driving, arguments, and sex gives the sense of a cable ever tautening and then slackening, until in the film's final minutes it finally snaps. Thus I argue that when the film's eruption into violence does occur, rather than this constituting a drastic break with the orientation established earlier, it is rather in keeping with the film's pattern of spasmodic outbursts of energy.

The repetitive patterns developed in *Twentynine Palms* give the film a structural affinity with negative conceptions of the everyday. Its patterning of repetition through language and action is without consequence—rather it is mundane, banal, redundant. This is not the repetition of De Sica's maid grinding coffee in *Umberto D*—a repetition with creative potential and the prospect of self-discovery as described by Andrew Klevan and discussed in the previous chapter (*Disclosure* 46-9). David and Katia's monotonous pattern of arguments and reconciliations is both constrained and incapable of speaking to anything beyond itself. Nor is the world invested with the prospect of self-realisation. David and Katia do not shape the space they inhabit, nor does it shape them. The *mise-en-scène* remains indifferent to their presence and their relation to the alternate space of the desert is literally one of alienation in the Modernist sense that Lukács describes, and which was cited in the previous chapter. Where the characters in Haneke's *The Seventh Continent* and Bresson's *Money* always hold the promise of an interiority that might yield an underlying coherence—a coherence that we are denied access to—David and Katia are so cut off from the world and each other that they give the impression of being thrown into it meaninglessly.

The following analysis of *Fat Girl* will show how, despite the film's analogous structure, Breillat's vastly different treatment of the same elements (the structural division of space, point of view, and language) both produces a different conception of the everyday—one of fruitful indeterminacy—and drastically alters the violence's affective potential. Where *Twentynine Palms* presents an orientation of alienation through its negative conception of the everyday as rigidly repetitive and superficial, *Fat Girl*'s everyday has a creative potential, enacted through the treatment of language, the potential self-realisation of characters, and the contrast between the alternate space of the family holiday and the imaginative invocation of the social space of home. I have argued that by adjusting our point of view we can see that the shift to violence in *Twentynine Palms* is hardly incongruous; in *Fat Girl* I argue it is indeed a definite rupture in the everyday depicted. However, this is not to be dismissed as a fault in Breillat's narration; rather, by considering the film in terms of its orienting structure of proximity, I want to show that the process by which we are involved in, rather than alienated from, the film affords disturbing affect in a way that Dumont's film does not.

## *Fat Girl*

I want to speak of certain events of language, of words in themselves rich in repercussions, or words misheard or misread that abruptly trigger a sort of vertigo at the instant in which one perceives that they are not what one had thought before. Such words often acted, in my childhood, as *keys*, either because surprising perspectives were opened through their very resonance or because, discovering one had always mutilated them, suddenly grasping them in their integrity somehow seemed a revelation, like a veil suddenly torn open or some outburst of truth. (Leiris “The Sacred in Everyday Life” 29)

Michel Leiris’s brief 1938 paper, “The Sacred in Everyday Life” recounts childhood memories pertaining to certain objects, places, and words that he connected with a sense of the sacred—akin to the hidden totality I have described in earlier accounts of the everyday. Leiris’s description of language in this paper is as a creative force: he describes words invented by himself and his brothers during play. A potential source of the uncanny, misrecognised words, once corrected gained new significance for Leiris, in one instance evoking a feeling of “triumphant discovery” (30). In another he found the words “took on a resonance that was especially disturbing” (30). I mention Leiris’s paper here, as it goes some way to illuminating the way language works in Breillat’s *Fat Girl* which I will show also embodies these two functions—the creative and the uncanny as a means of accessing profundity within the everyday. The creative potential of language in Breillat’s film is significantly contrasted to its negation in *Twenty-nine Palms*, and influences the film’s orienting structure of proximity.

As in *Twenty-nine Palms*, much is made of language in *Fat Girl* as a key element. It is, however, far more vital and varied in Breillat’s film. Rather than an unnatural abstraction which hinders understanding, language in *Fat Girl* is figured as having a creative potential. Ordinary words cast out of the mouths of the protagonists throughout the film seem both to shape the world they inhabit, and find their uncanny echo in the film’s violent ending. In the opening scene, the sisters walk in the woods expounding their respective views on what it means to be a virgin. Anaïs explains her philosophy of sex: “If I meet a man I love, I’d want to be broken in. He won’t think my first time counts. The first time should be with nobody.” It is apparent that Anaïs is wiser than her years; tinged with a premature cynicism, her words are weighted with an adult grasp of the world (as though it was Breillat speaking rather than a child). Elena’s, in contrast, are bound up in idealised romantic discourse. Anaïs wants to be “broken in,” whereas for Elena, virginity is “what counts.” This disparity is emphasised again in a later scene when Elena asks for advice on whether or not to sleep with Fernando. Bewitched by Fernando’s romantic gesture of an “engagement ring,” Elena

tells her sister, “I think I’m going to give myself to him tonight.” The language of sentiment is foreign to Anaïs, however, who responds bluntly, “You use some really weird expressions.” Later in the conversation, Anaïs restates her position on virginity: “Personally, I want my first time to be with a boy I don’t love. Because afterwards you realise he doesn’t love you or you don’t love him, and you feel dumb.” Elena, speaking with the empty authority of her incipient romance replies, “You’ll see when you fall in love.” But Anaïs remains stoic: “I doubt it.”

These words about virginity, like many others in the film, are retrospectively understood to be imbued with a premonitory significance once considered in the context of the film’s brutal ending: Elena’s romantic ideals end in heartbreak as she realises she has been deceived, and Anaïs loses her virginity to a madman in a deeply ambiguous scene that begins as a rape, and ends as something less clear-cut. This motif use of portentous language, layered throughout but only recognisable as such at the film’s end, possesses something akin to the vertiginous quality described by Leiris. The film’s final events vest certain words uttered throughout with an ominous resonance that they do not possess at the time of their enunciation. It is not that we have misrecognised or misunderstood certain dialogue, but that it comes to carry significance beyond its immediate meaning, bringing us closer to the effective opening up of language in *Eyes Wide Shut*. Language in *Fat Girl* has a creative potential, in fact we get the sense the girls’ world is borne out of their words, as though conjured on their early woodland walk. While we cannot recognise the girls’ discussion of virginity as foreshadowing at this early stage, Elena’s challenge regarding who can pick up a boy first becomes immediately manifest, announced only moments before the sisters meet Fernando at a nearby café, and Elena’s doomed romance begins.

Anaïs’s relationship to the world and to language, which I have already described in terms of maturity, begins in this scene to be revealed as more than an affected adult rhetoric or a simple conduit for Breillat’s ideology. Developed over the course of the film is the sense that Anaïs has a keenness of perception greater than that of any other character. As Fernando and Elena become acquainted—he is from Rome, she and Anaïs are on holiday but it is hard to leave their gated community—Anaïs looks on before interjecting “We’re not allowed,” a comment which embarrasses Elena. “Don’t worry,” giggles Anaïs, “he can’t understand a word you’re saying. He’s just being polite.”



Immediately, Anaïs can read Fernando in a way that Elena and the girls' parents are blind to. In the scene immediately following the sisters' meeting him, Fernando is at the family villa for lunch. Despite the drastic age difference between Fernando and Elena, (at least ten years) the girls' parents seem content with their friendship, even when Elena speaks of him in more familiar terms, stating that she will be putting him on a diet. When Mr. Pignot asks where Fernando met his daughters, (this is the only indication of wariness, being otherwise charmed by the man's aspirations to become a lawyer), his wife interjects before Fernando can respond. "François!" she smiles embarrassedly. "Young people meet. It just happens these days." Mrs. Pignot especially seems unable to interpret indicative nuances in behaviour of either daughter, constantly resorting to vapid maxims in lieu of genuine consideration: Anaïs eats so much because "it's hormonal," she is upset because "it's adolescence," and Elena has brought a man home because "young people meet."

Thus, in addition to its creative potential, language also functions as a currency of power for those who understand its mechanism and can read others. In Anaïs, this is an admirable trait that helps elicit our sympathy; she warns her sister about Fernando's suspect gesture of a valuable engagement ring, and later consoles her in her heartbreak. However, in Fernando it is an opportunity for manipulation, as emphasised in his seduction of Elena. In their first nighttime meeting, having snuck into the girls' shared bedroom, Fernando expresses frustration at the language barrier between them: "I'm sorry I don't speak French very well. I'd like to tell you all kinds of things." There is discussion about who will learn the other's language; Elena will take Italian at school next year, Fernando will learn French so that he might visit her in Paris. The irony here is that Fernando already speaks her language in the sense that he is able to exploit her quixotic rhetoric in order to procure sex. When denied vaginal intercourse, Fernando changes tack, insisting that consenting to anal sex would both allow her to retain her virginity and be "proof of love."

Elena's consent is hardly a clear endorsement; where she had interrupted Fernando's earlier attempts voicing her concerns, at this point she remains silent. Significantly, at the moment of penetration, Breillat cuts from a two-shot of the couple in bed, to a close up of Anaïs's face as she watches both curious and afraid. This reaction shot is held throughout; over Anaïs's nervous glances, we hear Elena's pained cries and Fernando's pleased groans. This striking denial of visual access is not a substitution based on censorial grounds: the shot of the couple in bed is not explicit, and we have already seen a shot of Fernando's erect penis. Instead it continues another motif: that of watching Anaïs watching.

Indeed, Breillat devotes a significant amount of time to Anaïs's expressions, from the readily apparent to the illegible, as she bears witness to events around her. The later scene, in which Fernando has vaginal intercourse with Elena, likewise holds on Anaïs's response of silent devastation. Beyond developing sympathy for Anaïs, this attention to her expressions functions as a visual accompaniment to the keenness of her perception that we see in language and her ability to read others. Prior to Fernando's arrival, Elena has instructed her sister to go to sleep. "You hear nothing, see nothing and know nothing." Of course Elena is demanding Anaïs be complicit in her forbidden tryst, but this line too gains resonance in our growing understanding that Anaïs's skill, or burden perhaps, is that she hears, sees, and knows more than anyone else.

However, it is not just Fernando that Anaïs is attuned to. When the girls' father is called back to work, cutting his vacation short, Anaïs watches from the doorway as he packs his things. "If he's flying back—" Anaïs advances with concern. Mrs. Pignot responds, explaining that she will drive, yet her daughter's apprehension is still not abated. Anaïs's foresight of course becomes significant in the fraught drive home during which a number of menacing trucks on the highway, coupled with her mother's growing fatigue and anxiety, imply a palpable threat to the family's safety.

Anaïs's attunement to the world around her helps bind us to her character. In terms of point of view, Breillat's film aligns us with her as the source of epistemic access to the narrative; very rarely are we privy to a scene from which she is absent. She and Elena are the only characters that elicit sympathy; the girls' parents are patently self-absorbed, Fernando is selfish and manipulative, and his mother, whom we only see briefly, is theatrically exaggerated in her performance to the point of comedy. In contrast to Dumont's treatment of David and Katia as animals under observation, Breillat's film affords an involvement with Anaïs and Elena that suggests both depth and the potential for transformation. This involvement is intimately connected to a positive conception of the everyday, as a source of authenticity via the attention to nuance. In order to demonstrate the way Breillat's film involves us with character, and how this involvement is bound up with the structuring of the melodramatic space (to borrow again from Thomas), this chapter will now turn to an important moment that is best representative of what I am calling the film's proximate orientation.



Fig. 28. Sisterly bonding in *Fat Girl*

The moment is one of bonding between sisters and occurs across two consecutive scenes, shot in a succession of long takes. It is the evening that Elena will lose her virginity to Fernando, and the girls stand before the bathroom mirror (see fig. 28). In close up, Elena puts her arm around Anaïs and leans into her, resting her head on her shoulder, and begins a monologue concerning how different they are. What we might initially anticipate to be more of Elena's vitriol—the pair have had a love/ hate relationship throughout the film punctuated with moments of genuine cruelty—turns out to be an astute and sensitive reading of their connection. At first, Anaïs too seems uneasy in this embrace. “No one would think we’re sisters,” Elena begins, “It’s true. We don’t take after anyone. It’s like we’re born of ourselves. It’s funny. We really have nothing in common. Look at you.” As though in preparation for more insults about her weight, Anaïs shuffles, swallows, averts her gaze. Elena continues, “You have small, hard eyes, while mine are hazy.” Anaïs adjusts her stance, as though to remove herself, but Elena grasps her anew, and continues: “But when I look deep into your eyes, it makes me feel like I belong, as if they were my eyes.” At this, Anaïs’s face lightens, revealing a subtle smile, and she responds, “I feel the same thing.” Returning her sister’s embrace, clasping Elena’s hand in her own, Anaïs smiles “That’s why we’re sisters.” The pair concedes that their hatred of each other is exacerbated by their difference, and negated by their likeness.

This conversation continues into the next scene, though it is clear some time has elapsed; the girls now lay side by side in Elena’s bed dressed in their nightclothes. After more musing from Elena on their rivalry, the sisters reminisce stories of growing up together. Elena again teases Anaïs about her weight, but unlike her previous attacks, there is a gentleness here that neutralizes her words, and a giggling Anaïs returns, “Bitch” in jest. Recounting her interpretation of their relationship as young children, Anaïs suggests that Elena’s affection for her ceased the moment she grew to match her in

size, strength and language. “Really?” Elena replies. “I don’t remember that. Are you sure you aren’t making it up?” Giggling, Anaïs mentions that in spite of their differences, most people do not bother to remember which sister is which, a point prompting Elena’s laughter and agreement. The pairs’ stories soon deteriorate into bursts of infectious laughter, gripping them in involuntary waves, renewed time and again by each other.

These moments, surely the kindest in the film, strike me as central to what I am calling *Fat Girl*’s orientating structure of proximity, and are animated by the combined treatment of language and the structural division of the melodramatic space. Where in *Twenty-nine Palms*, language is consistently the stuff of miscommunication and conflict, seemingly doomed to futile repetition, in Breillat’s film it has creative potential. Like the film’s motif vesting of language with the power to shape the world, Elena’s words here are simultaneously of observation and creation. (“It’s like we’re born of ourselves”/ “Are you sure you aren’t making it up?”). Further, these moments also make real the unseen domestic elsewhere of home that has until now only been mentioned in passing. This sense of a shared history is again in drastic contrast to Dumont’s hermetically sealed desert setting. We have heard about the girls’ home on the outskirts of Paris in the conversations between Fernando and Elena, and it is where their father must return early to deal with issues at work. While in Thomas’s terms, we remain firmly lodged in this alternate space, the sisters’ bonding grants us a kind of imaginative access to a better world, albeit constructed, or reconstructed. It is not literally the social space the girls’ father has returned to; the space evoked here is something between imagination and memory—“are you sure you aren’t making it up?”/ “I remember it perfectly.”

Most importantly, however, these scenes show that the everyday, and one another, might be discovered through concentrated attention. Like Lefebvre’s call to attend to the microstructures of the ordinary (*Critique of Everyday Life* 1:42), Elena’s attention to often ignored nuance allows a momentary acknowledgement and teasing out of strands of genuine human experience and connection amidst the otherwise alienating space of sibling rivalry and self-absorbed parents. If Elena is unable to read Fernando, she seems here to have a genuine acuity for Anaïs. This is emphasised in contrast to her previous interpretations of Anaïs’s behaviour, which often involved terse accusations of jealousy and attempts to replicate her. While there is probably truth in these claims, her snap dismissals are here replaced with a considered ability to articulate nuance. Elena’s pause to offer a measured reflection on the sisters’ differences and likeness is rewarded with these moments of genuine connection. These are the shades of distinction that are often overlooked; by

Elena in her flippant labeling of Anaïs throughout the film, by the girls' mother in her innocuous platitudes, and by outsiders who do not care to distinguish between them.

Richard Rushton's insightful paper "Acknowledgement and Unknown Women: The Films of Catherine Breillat" is helpful in articulating the significance of this kind of attention to others and the world that often goes unnoticed. Rushton investigates the persistent theme of Cavellian acknowledgement in the director's *oeuvre*, that is, the way her female characters constantly strive (and fail) to be acknowledged by the men they love as a means to mutual understanding. While Rushton is primarily concerned with how this theme of acknowledgement pertains to the characters' romantic relationships, he also signals that Breillat's ideology coincides with Cavell's in a broader sense:

Breillat (2004) once claimed that: "I love looking at things to truly know them. We think we know things because we push them aside. We 'know' them to truly avoid knowing them." What Breillat means to imply here is that, ordinarily, because we respond to the world in a manner that implies its meanings are hidden from us and unknown to us, we ignore things, we "push them aside." As a result, we fall back on customs and accepted wisdom; that is we invent all kinds of ruses and strategies for "knowing" things; we find preformed or preconstituted frameworks into which we can then shove the elements of the world we come across. (86-7)

Breillat's language here intersects with Cavell's notion of acknowledgement as it relates to the everyday as something to be acknowledged, rather than transformed or transcended. I noted in the previous chapter Cavell's "plight of scepticism" as the human desire to transform the world in order to feel close to it (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 172) and how this conception of the everyday had been taken up in Klevan's study of the everyday in cinema. While, as Rushton notes, in *Fat Girl* Elena's longing for acknowledgment from Fernando fails, and Anaïs from the outset rejects the possibility of acknowledgment—"I'd want to be broken in," (97)—if we look outside of the frame of romantic couplings and extend this discussion of acknowledgement in line with Cavell's broader conception of the everyday and our epistemological relation to it, what we see in these moments of bonding is the sisters' acknowledgement of each other.



Fig. 29. Imaginative access to the social space in *Fat Girl*

The establishment of this warmth, however, brings with it the potential for its loss. While we expect this loss to come in the transition from child to adult—it is no coincidence that these scenes occur on the eve Elena will lose her virginity—we do not expect it on the level of the elsewhere crashing into the here and now. However, it is the film’s orientation of proximity that forms the pull in *Fat Girl*’s pull/ push dynamic. These moments of kindness draw us in, allowing the radical disorientation in the film’s final minutes to be genuinely disturbing.

The arrival of Fernando’s mother to reclaim her ring means the immediate termination of the family holiday, and the treacherous drive home begins. After Mrs. Pignot breaks her silence to admonish Elena, Anaïs requests the car be stopped as she is feeling ill. In this scene, again, the girl’s language takes on a conjuring quality, but like the other instances of this, it is only understood retroactively. Elena holds Anaïs as she vomits by the roadside, their mother leaning against the car in the distance, waiting. “I hate her” Elena cries, “I wish she’d die.” We cut to a medium shot of mother, cigarette poised in one hand, the other propping up her elbow, disinterested. Elena continues, “I don’t care, I’ll die with her.” Anaïs, pauses, coughing, “Speak for yourself,” and spitting the last of the vomit from her mouth, “I don’t want to die.” Cars and trucks speed by in the distance. Elena counters, “No danger of that. You’re not in the dead man’s seat.”<sup>46</sup> On the surface, these are the frustrated declarations of a teenager devastated by heartbreak, realising that life is unjust and parents can be unforgiving. However, in retrospect, these words inadvertently carry a terrible weight; by morning Elena and her mother will be dead, and Anaïs presumably would have succumbed to the same fate had she been seated in Elena’s place. Again, words find their uncanny echo in the film’s concluding violence, with a sensation akin to Leiris’s sense of revelation in the wake of understanding previously mistaken aspects of language for what they really are.

<sup>46</sup> A colloquial French term for front passenger seat.

The shock of violence, when it does arrive, is made all the more palpable by the fact that, despite Breillat's concerted efforts to invest the film's final sequences with an imminent sense of dread, we cannot see it coming. Where films like *The Seventh Continent* and *Money* pare back film style, levelling unexpected violence and the banal, *Fat Girl*'s final road sequences begin to freight the everyday with a menacing quality. In contrast to the desert of Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*, which is consistently indifferent to the couple and their squabbling, in the third act of Breillat's film we see a comparatively expressionist representation of the family's strain. Claustrophobic in the car, this building tension appears to spill over into the *mise-en-scène*. Much is made of the wavering position of the family vehicle consistently dwarfed on a highway otherwise populated by large trucks, horns blaring; David Bowie's "The Pretty Things are Going to Hell" blasts through the radio, its volume jarring in an otherwise quiet film, and its ominous lyrics acquiring a sinister quality. In addition to the prospect of a car accident, Breillat points to other potential threats—having pulled over at the rest stop, Elena walks alone into the night to find a toilet, Anaïs locks eyes with the driver of a passing truck, and a point is made of locking the doors before Elena falls asleep.

While adding an ambient sense of threat to the world, these features contribute nothing to the potentiality or plausibility of violence as it does occur; rather they seem concerned with a more explicit misdirecting of our expectations. Furthermore, these cues significantly do not function like the generic signals we are granted in examples of contemporary French horror proper. The tension building non-diegetic soundtrack that accompanies the lead up to horror in films like *High Tension/Haute tension* (Aja 2003), *Them/ Ils* (Moreau and Palut 2006) and *Frontier(s)* (Gens 2007) is absent; while Breillat does employ an eerie and sparse non-diegetic score, notably, this only begins after the violence has already commenced, rendering it a response rather than a warning. Where generic cues might at least signal us to expect disruption, allowing us to prepare somewhat, Breillat leaves us like Anaïs in the car, futilely locking the doors only to have a madman smash through the windshield.

The violence comes out of nowhere and is exacted with startling efficiency. The girl's mother is slumbering, and Anaïs has just consoled her forlorn sister with quiet words of wisdom and bid her lock her door and go to sleep. For a while we watch Anaïs sit awake in the back seat, chewing on a long rope of marshmallow. All is quiet save for some distant trucks and bird song. From Anaïs we cut to a reverse shot, her perspective looking at the windshield. Breillat affords us only a second to

register the shape of a man's torso swinging a hatchet before the windshield is obliterated in a deluge of glass. Climbing onto the bonnet the stranger leans in and strikes Elena in the face with the axe, pausing afterwards to lock eyes with a terrified but silent Anaïs. The mother is only awoken as the man tears her dress, before strangling her to death.

That Anaïs's life is spared, in conjunction with the portentous use of language and expressionist *mise-en-scène*, has led some to question the epistemic reliability of the film's concluding violence, interpreting it as taking place in the imagination of Anaïs. Indeed, one reviewer encourages such a reading in order to circumvent the horror, stating: "The climax is distressing indeed, yet there is an interpretive escape route" (Groen "Seething Sibling Revalry"). Emily Fox-Kayles, likewise, reads the violent shift as Anaïs's re-enactment of a Freudian primal scene, stating: "Breillat provides much cinematic evidence to suggest that the film's depiction of the rape is a staging of Anaïs's fantasy, in which her subject position shifts from passive rape victim to active participant in the exploration of her sexual experience" ("*A ma soeur!*" 24). Keesey questions whether, like her family, Anaïs has also fallen asleep, noting the appearance of the attacker as hairy "introduces something alien and surreal, as if he were a woodcutter or a wolf in a dark fairytale" ("Split Identification" 102). While the notion that the concluding violence may indeed be imagined is a common critical suggestion and one worth considering, I do not find the supporting evidence to be compelling enough to make this determination. For example, in one instance, Fox-Kayles cites "the absence of any ambient sound" (24) as a cue for our shift into Anaïs's interiority, however this is simply inaccurate. Breillat, herself, neither confirms or denies the suggestion of an imagined ending, preferring ambiguity, though it should be noted that despite charges of absurdity of the film's climax, it was inspired by a news article (Sobczynski "Interview with Catherine Breillat"). Coulthard is measured in her response, stating that the culminating violence in *Fat Girl* throws a range of interpretations into play: while we may interpret the ending as fantasy, it can "also be seen as a diegetically real, brutal explosion of nonsensical violence that asserts the presence of the outer world on self-absorbed, contained bourgeois family life" ("Desublimating Desire" 66). Alternately again, Coulthard posits that the burst of violence could be a metaphor for the violence intrinsic to a cultural fetishisation of female virginity. Ultimately for Coulthard, however, "the violence of the ending obtains a kind of persistent, mystifying ambiguity which works to make the final acts ambivalent, shocking and sublime" (66).



Like *Twentynine Palms*, *Fat Girl* too ends with the discovery of violence by the police. This time multiple officers form a crime scene, some bagging evidence while others escort Anaïs from the woods after her attack. Her final words, “Don’t believe me if you don’t want to” are in response to one officer’s comment to another about Anaïs’s claim that she was not raped, and yet like other instances of language in the film, these words open up, rather than enclose meaning. “Don’t believe me if you don’t want to” is less an admittance to potential untruth (I may have lied to you, you may find that I was indeed raped), than it is a gesture towards an epistemological uncertainty in matters of consent (rape is a matter of conjecture, I “know” I was not raped because I did not allow myself to be raped, but you may “know” otherwise depending on the terms you bring to determine what “rape” is). Those who take the final violence to be the product of Anaïs’s imagination may also interpret her statement differently; J. Hoberman states that with these words, the possibility of the fantasy interpretation “doubles back on itself” (“The Flesh is Bleak”). Importantly, these words again point towards a use of language in which meaning is not fixed; language has the potential to shape the world, whether by Anaïs’s creation of wholly imagined events or by her suggestion that the status of events are, like the shared history of the girls’ bonding, not objective but susceptible to opinion.



Fig. 30. The earth stops—the freeze frame that ends *Fat Girl*

I spoke earlier of the final shot of *Twentynine Palms*, in which the attending police officer argues with a colleague over his radio, as indicative of the persistence of a world fraught with both the superficial and conflicting. Where the world of *Twentynine Palms* endures without David and Katia, at the end of *Fat Girl* it literally stops as we hold on the freeze frame of Anaïs’s inscrutable gaze for approximately eighteen seconds before the credits roll. Like her final enigmatic words, her face here opens up potential meaning rather than clearly defining it. Breillat once again implores us to study Anaïs’s face, yet where her expressions had previously been clearly legible, here her countenance is sullenly defiant.

Regardless of whether we take the violence to be objective or subjective, the film's dénouement constitutes a horrific shift in its orientation, and its capacity for disturbing affect is dependent upon our prior involvement. Through the melodramatic structuring of space, the vesting of language with a world-making quality, and attention to and acknowledgement of that world, Breillat's film crafts a proximate orientating structure. The everyday crafted in *Fat Girl* is one open to possibility and one that rewards attention to nuance with genuine human connection and the potential for self-realisation, and yet with that acknowledgement of the world comes the potential for its loss.

Dumont's film, by contrast, depicts a world already closed off; David and Katia are stuck in alienating patterns of repetition which extend beyond the micro level of dialogue and action, to structure the film as a whole. If, in *Fat Girl*, language makes the world and has the potential to transform those within it, in *Twentynine Palms* it is more akin to the Old Testament's tower of Babel, already collapsing and alienating those in its wake. David and Katia cannot acknowledge one another, cannot reach a level of mutual understanding, because meaningful communication itself is impossible. The violence of *Twentynine Palms* is the culmination of latent enmity throughout the film, from the couple's frequent and frustrated implosions, to the hostility of those they encounter. And yet the world they inhabit is unresponsive to their presence and enduring in their absence. This is in stark opposition to *Fat Girl* whose key characters seem to shape the world as they inhabit it, to the point where the *mise-en-scène* comes to absorb their strain, and to the point where the verity of events is beholden to their interpretation.

## Conclusion

Despite the structural affinity of *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms*, films which, in their concluding moments, erupt into violence seemingly at odds with the relative banality of the preceding narrative development, I have argued that the affective quality of this violence is different in the two films. Attempts to explain this violence in terms of sudden shifts in genre have been useful as far as they go, but they only go so far. Further, applying generic standards to films that certainly reference, but do not strictly adhere to genre convention, even in their more conventional moments, seems an ill-fitting lens and, I argue, fails to bring us closer to an understanding of disturbing affect. Instead I have proposed examining these turns to violence not as isolated devices, but in the context of their nuanced relation to the everyday that concerns the majority of these films. By examining the films' broader structures of orientation, that is, the way the films make bids to involve us (or hold us at a distance) in ways that go beyond genre, we are afforded a better insight into how the films grant or

withhold a means of understanding the violence they depict. Crucial to this distinction are the films' respective treatments of the everyday—Dumont alienates his characters, from his audience as much as from each other, through his location of them in a world dominated by futile repetition, cut off from any sense of an authenticity or hidden totality; in contrast, Breillat's characters occupy a more positive conception, a world open to creativity and in which they have a stake, but a world which is also open to multiple and ambiguous meanings, precluding hermeneutic closure. Where *Fat Girl* involves us in what I have called its proximate orientation—the pull in the pull/ push dynamic that paves the way for the disturbing affect of being cast out by sudden violence, *Twentynine Palms* holds us at a distance from the outset. Violence in Dumont's film is rather the logical and inevitable conclusion to the film's broader structure, affording a sense of legibility that Breillat's film does not. The following chapter considers how disturbing cinema's preclusion of textual closure not only extends its affective quality, but makes a bid to unsettle the viewer's own conception of daily life with analyses of Gaspar Noé's *I Stand Alone* (1998) and Markus Schleizer's *Michael* (2011).

## Chapter Five Return to the Everyday

*I Stand Alone/ Seul Contre Tous* (Noé 1998), *Michael* (Schleinkerle 2011)

In our ordinary experience of the world, nothing outside of us singles out for our attention the most significant aspects of, and patterns in, the space-time slices we perceive. Nothing presents us with the telling close-up or the synoptic long shot, and nothing cuts the moments of perception into a segmented, transparent ribbon that adheres to a “dramatic logic” in the visible action. For this reason, the phenomena we witness often appear to us as puzzling, indeterminate, ambiguous, and without a guiding structure. This is a fundamental truism about our fragile perceptual connection to the world and, as a fact about our universal limitations as perceivers, it is one that has the deepest human consequences. (Wilson *Narration in Light* 90)

### Introduction

After the mystery at the heart of George Sluizer’s 1988 film *The Vanishing* has been resolved, and the film’s protagonist has been murdered, that is, after the disruptions to the everyday, we see a return to it. In the film’s final moments, the camera at ground level on a lawn focuses on a praying mantis clinging to a blade of grass, before tracking and tilting upward to capture housewife Simone who waters plants with a watering can. She turns her head momentarily to glance at her children playing in the garden. We then see her husband Raymond in repose, his expressionless face propped up by his hand, mind seemingly elsewhere, a book abandoned by his side. This imagery of a relaxed weekend at home is set against the preceding scene in which the film’s protagonist, Rex, awakens in the darkness of a makeshift coffin to realise that Raymond has buried him alive. The live burial is horrifying: we watch Rex alternate between futile screams and hysterical laughter as the flame of his cigarette lighter tapers out. But perhaps more troubling here is the juxtaposition of these shots with others depicting a family at rest. In part this pertains to the discrepancy between our awareness as to what Raymond has done, what lies under this earth, and his family’s blissful ignorance. But bound up in this is the sense that, in spite of what we have just witnessed, this family will carry on as they always have, and that the rhythms of daily life will persist unabated.

It is this sense of the everyday as a force that endures, regardless of interruptions, that this chapter will consider. In the preceding chapters, I have endeavoured to interrogate the various aesthetic strategies engaged by instances of European art cinema to preclude viewers from drawing a satisfactory connection between violence and meaning. It is my contention that such gaps, evinced

in the films' treatment of spectatorial address, de-dramatised style, or orienting structures, are key to the realisation of disturbing affect. These gaps are the product of the pull/ push dynamic that has been a notable mechanism, though operating in a variety of ways, across all of the films examined. On the one hand the depiction of the everyday internalises its dual character: it can constitute a "pull" through its establishment of familiar patterns and rhythms, but that can bleed into a "push" threatening boredom through repetition and banality. Alternately, the violence can be a "pull"—the attraction of spectacle that disrupts the mundane, and a "push" in the aversive sight of degradation and suffering. Equally, we may want to experience the pull of proximity to the victims of cruelty and violence, but have insufficient anchoring to them through the familiar experience of sharing the interiority that would afford this closeness.

The representations of violence I have been charting are connected through their apparent disruption of the everyday: an everyday which, with the exception of *Salò* and *Come and See*, otherwise dominates the films' duration. Notably, more often than not, this disruptive violence occurs at the end of the films: the culminating orgy of torture that ends *Salò*, the Schober family's suicide in *The Seventh Continent*, Yvon's mass murder in *Money*, Jeanne's stabbing of a client in *Jeanne Dielman*, and, of course, the rape and murder that ends *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* explored in the previous chapter. Very rarely are we afforded a sense of the way in which the world will continue after these moments, though, of course, it will; in a paradoxical dynamic the violence both closes the film (the film ends) and leaves it open (we cannot contain its meaning). In contrast, this chapter examines films that draw attention to the persistence of the everyday, and the persistence of violence within it. Where many of the films cited earlier end abruptly after their violent disruptions, Gaspar Noé's *I Stand Alone* and Markus Schleizer's *Michael* are significant for their contemplation of what a return to the everyday might look like. More troubling still is their implication that violence and the everyday are perhaps not mutually exclusive. Elaborating on theoretical conceptions of everyday time as both punctuated by events and circadian in its repetitions, this chapter argues that these films frustrate our desire for coherence by making explicit the fallacy of the narratives we construct to make the everyday meaningful.

## Everyday time

This thesis began with what I took to be an overemphasis on moments of crisis and rupture in new extreme cinema, noting that in fact many of these films have a resounding preoccupation with the everyday and that this relationship between extreme and ordinary warrants attention. In articulating

this relationship, I have employed Lukács's notion of the paroxysmal instant, the "lightning that illuminates the banal" (*Soul and Form* 153) as a recurrent metaphor for the affective quality of the moments of sudden violence that rupture the everyday of these films. The notable difference being that where we expect such jolting moments to elucidate narrative, to carry a coherent message, in these films the violence is not hospitable to secure explanation, its significance undefined. I want to return to this tension between the eventful and the perpetual in terms of the conceptions of everyday time that were mentioned in my introductory chapter.

Time is a crucial element to the understanding of the everyday. For Lefebvre the tension is between two modalities of time: the linear and the cyclic. Linear time is a construct of modernity, "acquired, rational, and in a sense abstract and antinatural" (*Critique of Everyday Life* 2:49). This is the time of calendars, of narrative history, an imposition on the natural in order to account for it. In opposition is the persistence of circadian rhythms that Lefebvre calls cyclic time, "natural, in a sense irrational, and still concrete" (49). Cyclic time pertains to a pastoral understanding of the world, the relationship between the human and the natural worlds, which is in tension with modernity's imposition of linear time as a means to account for the world. Fernand Braudel, describing the latter conception in relation to the way we are to understand history, gives an evocative account of cyclical time:

There is, besides, a history slower still...a history which almost stands still, a history of man in his intimate relationship to the earth which bears and feeds him; it is a dialogue which never stops repeating itself, which repeats itself in order to persist, which may and does change superficially, but which goes on, tenaciously, as though it were somehow beyond time's reach and ravages. (12)

In contrast, linear time is progressive, eventful, imposed; it subsumes the cyclic and yet it is necessarily bound up with it (Lefebvre *Critique of Everyday Life* 3:11-12). Such a distinction, what Michael Sheringham calls the everyday's "bewildering ambiguity of temporality" as "both cumulative and non-cumulative" (*Everyday Life* 33), was earlier a concern of Heidegger in *Being and Time*.

In my introductory chapter, I touched on how the everyday is typically conceived to be akin to the cyclic and non-cumulative, as opposed to the eventful. Rita Felski notes this tendency in scholarship on the everyday:

everyday life is typically distinguished from the exceptional moment: the battle, the catastrophe, the extraordinary deed. The distinctiveness of the everyday lies in its lack of distinction and differentiation; it is in the air one breathes, the taken-for-granted backdrop, the commonsensical basis of all human activities. ("The Invention" 17)

For those who subscribe to a positive conception of the everyday, it is here, in the uneventful, that profundity is located if we only attend to its significance. Alternately, in negative conceptions of the everyday, the cyclic is the space of alienation which must be transcended in order to access authentic experience.

I have also already argued for a more complete understanding of the everyday that comprises both the banal and the momentous—as noted in Felski's argument that to avoid the eventful would be to force an inaccurate vision of uniformity, and Lefebvre's contention that the everyday is not mere emptiness waiting to be seized by spectacular events (Sheringham *Everyday Life* 19-20). I will now extend this line of thinking to consider the way in which the punctuated trajectory of linear time speaks to a way of understanding the world, and the implications of this understanding in narrative. I argue that this dual conception of time as perpetual and cumulative is important to the way the films in this chapter extend their grip beyond their duration and how this dual conception informs the viewer's own understanding of the everyday they return to.

The distinction between cumulative and non-cumulative time presents a way of comprehending the world, and was crucial to the *Annales* school founded in France in 1929 which sought to reconceptualise the recording of history less as a linear record of events and individuals and concerned rather with the micro detail of the everyday, the *longue durée* (Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* 102-3). Braudel, a key member of the *Annales* School, and whom I quoted above, elucidates this division in his book *On History*:

To the narrative historians, the life of men is dominated by dramatic accidents, by the actions of those exceptional beings who occasionally emerge, and who often are the masters

of their own fate and even more of ours. And when they speak of “general history,” what they are really thinking of is the intercrossing of such exceptional destinies, for obviously each hero must be matched against another. A delusive fallacy, as we all know. Or perhaps we should say, more justly, a vision of too narrow a world, a world made familiar by dint of having been so much explored and evoked, a world in which the historian may delight in consorting with princes—above all a world, torn from its context, where one might believe in all good faith that history is nothing but a monotonous game, always the same, like the thousand combinations of pieces in a game of chess—a game constantly calling forth analogous situations and feelings which are always the same, with everything governed by the eternal, pitiless recurrence of things. (Braudel *On History* 11)

Key here is Braudel’s highlighting of the tendency to narrativise the grand scale of the world, to render it legible. For Braudel, to define the world in terms of a linear narrative consisting only of the eventful is to impose abstract parameters divorced from reality, which necessarily includes the cyclic. It is a reductive oversimplification in the interest of making the infinitely vast graspable.

Frank Kermode likewise describes the imposition of narrative structures onto lived experience as a means of satisfying a fundamental human need for meaning. Kermode considers the narrativisation of the world to be in accordance with apocalyptic thinking, which “belongs to rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world” (*The Sense of an Ending* 5). The Bible, for example, provides a renowned historical trajectory from beginning to end, starting with the creation of the earth and concluding with a projection of its annihilation. This linear structure, akin to that of basic literary plots, is unitary and concordant (6-7). Significantly, Kermode argues, it is a model that we adopt to make sense of our existence. Born *in media res*, humans project fictive origins and endings in order to make sense of the interim, and thus render it tolerable (7). The apocalyptic is demonstrated to be an endlessly renewable model of thought; undermined time and time again by the endurance of the world, the narrative is revised rather than discarded (8). Again, Kermode highlights the affinity with the elements of narrative fiction, which employs sudden turns of events that require us to adjust our expectations (18). Such narrative twists, or “peripeteia,” both rely on our trust in the end, and bespeak our desire to reach it via novel and edifying means. Therefore our incorporation of these peripeteia in narrative fiction, enacts the process of reframing belief in an end, as in apocalyptic thought. Kermode then extends this argument, linking the disruptive event to an expectation of revealed meaning and authenticity:

we are, to look at the matter in another way, re-enacting the familiar dialogue between credulity and scepticism. The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve



expectations, is finding something out for us, something *real*. The falsification of an expectation can be terrible, as in the death of Cordelia; it is a way of finding something out that we should, on our more conventional way to the end, have our eyes closed to. Obviously it could not work if there were not a certain rigidity in the set of our expectations. (18)

It is this dynamic that I believe is at play in the films in this thesis. Rather than offering a concordant beginning and end, and having us enact a process of readjustment of our expectations ultimately leading to understanding, these films, by thwarting our attempts to contain violence via various manifestations of what I call a pull/ push dynamic, instead call into question the narratives and constructs we project. Where I have already explored how this occurs in relation to stylistic and structural elements, this chapter will now turn to films that call our attention to the workings of time as a means of undermining closure.

### *I Stand Alone*

Gaspar Noé's debut feature *I Stand Alone* is set in France in 1980, and follows an unemployed horsemeat butcher<sup>47</sup> who feels impotent in the machinations of a life he cannot control. The film forms something of a sequel to his 1991 short film *Carne*, which depicted the butcher's assault on an innocent construction worker whom he mistakenly believed had raped his mute teenage daughter. The events of *Carne* are condensed in *I Stand Alone* into a short montage, the remainder of the feature picking up where the short leaves off, showing the aftermath of this event on his life following his release from prison. Bidding his daughter goodbye in the psychiatric institution that has cared for her during his sentence, the butcher leaves Paris for Lille to move in with his emasculating mistress (now pregnant) and her mother. When accused of infidelity, the enraged butcher beats his mistress to abort the child, steals a gun and flees back to Paris. For the most part, we follow the butcher's unsuccessful attempts to find work and borrow money from old friends, as he grows increasingly frustrated. Down to his last francs and filled with rage at the constant rejection, the butcher resolves to use the three bullets he has to kill those who he feels have wronged him. Instead, however, he collects his daughter from the institution bringing her back to the slipshod hotel in which she was conceived and struggles to decide whether or not he should give way to his incestuous desire for her, and kill them both. We see this murder/ suicide decision play out with graphic violence, however it is later revealed to have taken place only in the butcher's

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<sup>47</sup> Notably, the butcher's name, Phillipe Chavalier, is referred to only once: in a brief shot of his identification documents in the montage that introduces him. Aside from this, he remains essentially nameless, consistent with his self-identification as a kind of everyman figure.

imagination. Resolving to take the moral high ground,<sup>48</sup> he puts his gun away and breaks into tears of love for his daughter. It is implied that he still has sex with her, however, the butcher's narration frames this in the context of true love and the film ends on a comparatively cheerful note as he contemplates his happiness in this moment and the possibilities of the future.

*I Stand Alone* is extraordinarily bleak and many critics have likened it to Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976).<sup>49</sup> The film is dominated by an oppressively pessimistic narration as the central character spits misanthropic vitriol throughout. It is also characterised by an aggressive style established in *Carne*; intertitles reminiscent of Godard's *Weekend* (1967) break up the narrative and give further weight to the butcher's mentality with statements such as JUSTICE, MORALITY, and LIVING IS A SELFISH ACT. Rapid camera movements often accompanied by loud gunshot sounds or low note bursts on the soundtrack are also used to jolting effect. Notoriously, before the film's climactic act of graphic violence, namely the imagined murder of the butcher's daughter Cynthia, a title card warning the viewer that they have thirty seconds to leave the screening appears, which proceeds to count down before flashing with alarm sounds. These devices function both to draw us uncomfortably into the butcher's nihilistic subjectivity, while also self-consciously drawing on B-movie gimmicks.<sup>50</sup> If Haneke's *The Seventh Continent* and Bresson's *Money*, explored in chapter three, work to efface violence from the films' aesthetic, Noé's film is at the opposite end of the spectrum; violence has an ambient presence throughout, in the film's style and sound design even when not occurring on screen, constituting a low-level continuous aesthetic assault.

The affective power of the film is a common thread in its reception. Critically, *I Stand Alone* was largely appreciated, rather than recommended as a source of pleasure. Daniel Hickin succinctly describes the film's British reception: "the consensus being that the film was a powerful experience, yet difficult to enjoy" ("Censorship" 122-3). Jonathan Romney of *The Guardian* describes the film as "cinematic terrorism—a nail-bomb directed at the audience, at French society, and at the often complacent institution of French cinema" ("Blood Simple"). Romney's assessment here, however,

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<sup>48</sup> The butcher's sense of morality is a troubled but essential theme in the film which will be discussed in more detail over the course of this analysis.

<sup>49</sup> See French "One Man's Meat...", Gleiberman "*I Stand Alone*," Hoberman "Meat and Greet," Holden "A Hard One to Watch, Even Harder to Live," Ridingparis "Nihilism Gets a Butcher's Face, France a Jolt of Realism," Romney "Blood Simple," Rosenbaum "The Brutal Truth," Smith "Meat is Murder."

<sup>50</sup> As critics have pointed out, Noé's warning countdown at the film's climax is inspired by William Castle's inclusion of a "fright break" in *Homicidal* (1961). See Hoberman "Meat and Greet," Romney "Blood Simple," Smith "Meat is Murder."

is more of an appraisal of the film's "originality and fierceness" than it is a criticism. Philip French of *The Observer* likewise straddles this response between the affecting and the unpleasurable:

It's a painful picture to listen to, and with its ugly bars, grubby streets, shabby hotel rooms an unpleasant one to watch. But it does have the ring of truth... You won't easily forget *Seul Contre Tous* and you won't rush to see it for a second time. ("One Man's Meat...")

This judgement of the film as difficult but accomplished is not limited to its British release. Jonathan Rosenbaum of the *Chicago Reader* describes the film as a "corrosive masterpiece," summarising its affective quality in blunt terms: "*I Stand Alone* is a movie that removes your head, fucks with it for a while, and then hands it back to you" ("The Brutal Truth"). Similarly, Stephen Holden, writing for *The New York Times*, describes the film's affective quality in violent terms, arguing that the film "uses the most extreme images and jarring sound effects to brand its character's searing message onto our brains whether we like it or not." Later in his tentatively positive review, Holden asserts: "The movie's triumph—if that's what it is—is in the force of its assault. It takes one man's unbearable truth and bashes us in the skull with it. The hurt lingers." ("A Hard One to Watch").

While the film's aggressive aesthetic, with its startling sounds and abrupt camera movements, affects an immediate visceral response, in the following analysis I want to concentrate on another element that I think is crucial to the film's enduring unsettling quality, this being the treatment of time. *I Stand Alone* sees the butcher's move away from an alienated vision of the everyday to one of creative potential. This is simultaneously a move away from the determinism of an eventful, cumulative, narrativised conception of time, towards an embracement of the non-cumulative, slow moving, perpetual and indeterminate. As we will see, however, his discovery of the latent possibility to be found in an acknowledgement of the everyday is inextricably tied to his warped subjectivity, a fact that complicates this openness and draws attention to its implications.

Time is recurrently brought to our attention in *I Stand Alone*: from the butcher's incessant existential ruminations on life and death, his taking employment at a nursing home where he witnesses the passing of an old woman, intertitles that remind us of the time, date and location of events, to the film's climactic thirty second warning countdown. I want to start, however, by considering the film's opening moments, which establish the determinist logic that will dominate

the majority of the film, and which is significantly subverted by the film's end. This consists of a brief scene in a bar with characters whom we do not see again (something of a prologue to the film itself which thereafter focuses on the butcher), and a montage of images that introduce him as he narrates his life story from birth to the present.

The film opens with a bright red map of France, emblazoned with the letter "F" as synthesised orchestral music plays. This is followed by a title card stating MORALITY before a brief introductory scene plays out depicting a thirty-something year old man speaking with bravado to some acquaintances in a bar about morality being the province of the rich. His posturing is underscored with sudden cuts to black and what will become a motif use of arresting bursts of sound. Another title-card reading JUSTICE appears before returning to the man's gasconade. "You wanna see my morality?" he asks, shortly before brandishing a handgun. "Whether you're right, or whether you're wrong, same difference, friend."

This scene establishes the film's tone. Immediately we enter a world in which the discrepancy in power relations between classes is acutely registered, and in which violence is understood to be the only means of levelling the playing field. The notion that autonomy for the downtrodden is only achievable through violence, a kind of flippant white man's bar-room appropriation of Franz Fanon, pervades the rest of the film, dominating the butcher's logic as expressed through his incessant voice-over and abhorrent actions. What we might otherwise be tempted to dismiss as the plight of one deranged individual is undermined by the film's prologue, which suggests on the contrary that this mentality is all-pervasive rather than isolated. The world we enter in *I Stand Alone* is one of imminent danger; deadly force is established as the final arbiter of morality and, as will be conveyed throughout the film, "morality" is a relative rather than objective term, beholden only to the whim of individuals.

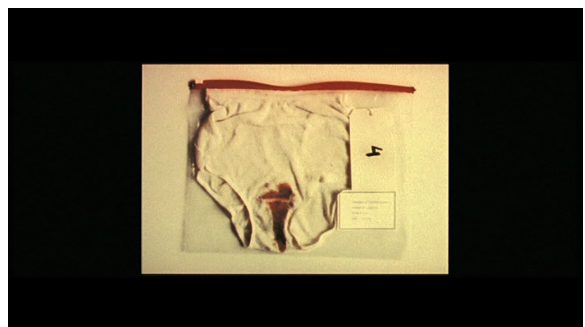
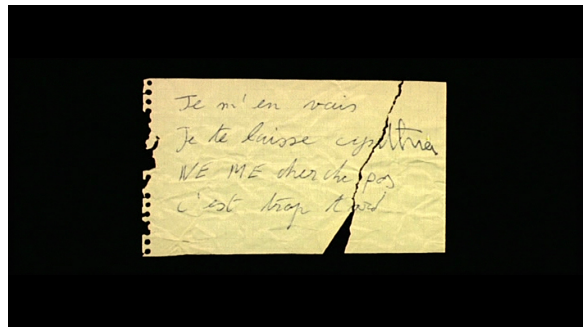
This prologue is followed by rousing military music and a title card that defines the film as "the tragedy of a jobless butcher struggling to survive in the bowels of his nation" before the film's title appears and the butcher's narration begins. "To each his own life, to each his own Morality" are the butcher's opening words before he relates his life story in the third person, until the present day over a series of still photographs. Positioning himself as an everyman, the butcher describes his life as "the story of a man like so many others, as common as can be." That the story that follows could

hardly be considered “common” implicitly suggests that, in the world of the film, the ordinary is bound up in trauma. Abandoned by his mother at age two, and orphaned at age six when his father dies in a German prisoner of war camp, the butcher describes his sexual abuse by a religious instructor, before his life takes a turn for the better at age fourteen when, “driven by survival” he learns his trade. Hard work and saving see him open a butcher shop at age thirty, a shop which, a few years later, becomes successful. He then fathers a daughter, Cynthia, after getting a young factory worker pregnant, but the mother abandons them both and he struggles on as a single father, his daughter mute. The onset of Cynthia’s puberty gives stir to incestuous desire: “She takes on shapes. The father, unwilling bachelor, must resist temptation.” Events take a turn for the worse again when Cynthia gets her first period. Not understanding what is happening to her body she sets off to her father’s shop but a worker attempts to seduce her en route. A neighbour delivers the girl to her father explaining what he has witnessed but, seeing blood on her skirt, the butcher instantly assumes she has been raped and runs off in search of the perpetrator, stabbing an innocent construction worker in the face. The butcher is sent to prison, Cynthia to an institution, and in order to compensate the surviving construction worker, he must sell his flat and shop. Upon his release some months later, the butcher takes a job in a bar and begins a relationship with the matron. The matron falls pregnant, sells her bar offering to buy a meat market with the money so they might start over in the North of France. Feeling he has no other options, the butcher bids goodbye to his daughter and moves into a cramped apartment with the matron and her mother. Despite feelings of alienation in his new surrounds, he resolves to forget his daughter and his past. Upon reaching the present moment, the butcher’s narration shifts to the first person, simply concluding: “There you have it, that’s me. That’s my life. But today I’m starting life over again. Yes, ladies and gentlemen... Today, I’m resetting the counter.”

In the space of approximately two minutes, the significant personal events of forty-one years are condensed into a coherent narrative of cause and effect. In this condensing is an effacement of the everyday as background, replete with contingencies; it is rather a straight trajectory punctuated and determined by the momentous. The butcher’s narrativisation of his life plays like a synopsis of a Zola novel, in that his emphasis on his self-identification as a “being of pure survival” with limited autonomy bring to mind a sense of naturalist determinism. The butcher’s narration in this introductory sequence often renders him as a passive protagonist—many of the events described happen *to him*, rather than as a result of his actions. In the few instances where he does make choices (to have sex with the young factory worker, to stab an innocent man, to embark on a relationship with the bar matron), these are generally answered by a loss of autonomy again—

“events precipitate,” he is “forced” to raise his daughter on his own, to sell his flat and his shop, and “having no other choice” agrees to leave Paris with the matron.

This determinist logic is emphasised with the montage of still photographs that underscore the butcher’s narration. The plying of details to promote a scientific level of authenticity in the naturalist novel finds its cinematic echo in photos of the butcher from childhood to adulthood, snapshots of his shop and prison cell, along with crime scene exhibits and identification documents, serving to anchor his story with an evidentiary value (see figs. 31-38). Bleak and empty vistas locate us in Paris’s industrial outskirts, which the butcher’s words populate with workers, neighbours, matrons—nameless icons of the working class.



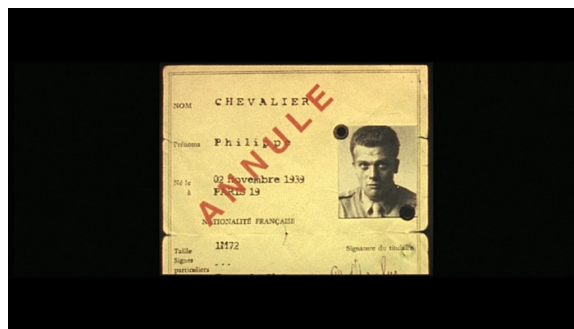


Fig. 31 – 38. Narrativised time—excerpts from the opening montage in *I Stand Alone*

Similarly, the title cards that appear throughout the film—announcements of the date, time, and location of events, or block lettered statements interrupting the film to accentuate the butcher's nihilistic mentality, seem to claim authority, and yet this authority is often undermined by what is presented. While not a direct representation of the butcher's voice (unlike his narration, they seem motivated by the film rather than its protagonist), these titles with their bold forthright statements—DEATH OPENS NO DOOR, or LIVING IS A SELFISH ACT, for example—seem to distil thematically the butcher's line of thinking. And yet, at other times, lone words on screen—MORALITY or JUSTICE, for example—seem to function reflexively; unequivocal statements are interjected only to point to the absence of what they denote. The incongruence between these words and their interpretation by the film's characters—"You wanna see my morality?"—highlights a troubling discrepancy between the absolutism their presentation seems to claim, and the relativism by which they are adopted and polluted on-screen. This notion that concepts such as morality and justice are open to interpretation plays an important role throughout the film, but is particularly crucial to the film's ending, which will be explored in detail a little later in this chapter.

Established in these two introductory scenes is what I argue to be the fundamental logic of the film that the butcher must eventually turn away from, namely, that for the working class, everyday time is a linear trajectory of alienating events from which a level of autonomy can only be seized through decisive, violent action. Noé takes pains to reinforce this reasoning throughout the film in a variety of ways. Title cards that interrupt the narrative, the butcher's incessant voice over, and aspects of the *mise-en-scène* all work to promulgate the film's ideology—a morose concentration of social Darwinism in which life is characterised by a will to genetic survival in a world where everyone is alienated. Most prominently this is conveyed through the butcher's narration, an oppressive and bleak series of observations that recurrently boil down to an animalistic essentialism:

You think it's a civilized world, but it's really a jungle. And in the jungle you better be one of the strongest. Otherwise you're mere prey, forced to save your ass by running. And it all depends on luck at birth. Either you're born poor like most of us and you undergo the strength of others. You follow orders, suffer humiliation and maybe you get violent. Or you're born rich and you watch your money. You do like others do, pretend to love wife, kids and friends like they all pretend to love you. But the day your life or house catches fire, when your middle-class dreams crumble, and you have no more to give, your brothers, your so-called friends will all join together to crush you.

The butcher's narration is often characterised by a paring back of the positive aspects of human existence to reveal a fundamental ruthless drive of self-interest. Familial love and loyalty are theorised as schemes feigned only for the strategic betterment of one's own situation; sex passes the time, the butcher remarks, but is essentially "nothing but a reproduction code written in your balls." Similarly, the MORALITY and JUSTICE critiqued in the opening barroom scene are concepts returned to throughout the film, figured as relative abstractions of an essentially primal drive.

Central to this logic is a distinction between autonomy and determinism, encapsulated by title cards late in the film that state: LIVING IS A SELFISH ACT. SURVIVING IS A GENETIC LAW. Over the course of the film we see the butcher's struggle to shift from one pole of this dichotomy to the other. We are constantly reminded of the butcher's desire to seize autonomy from what he perceives as an otherwise predetermined trajectory. Visiting a seedy porn theatre after witnessing the elderly woman's death at the rest home, the butcher philosophises:

Come into the world. Eat. Wag your bone. Give birth. And die. Life is a huge void. It always has been and always will be. A huge void which could manage perfectly well without me. I'm sick and tired of playing this game. No. No more. I want to live something personal, something intense. I won't be the last interchangeable cog in a huge machine. The day of my death I want to know that I've done more than the same crap done by a shitload of grovelling morons.

This logic of seizing autonomy through decisive action is also reinforced by the *mise-en-scène*. Early in the film, we see the butcher watching a cycling race on television. The commentator explains the qualities required to be the winner: "He's got to know where to position his wheels when the going gets rough. He must know when to break away from the anonymity of the pack." Re-appropriated into the butcher's reasoning, however, this innocuous observation finds echo in the



butcher's morally repugnant response to the world's determinism. Aborting his baby, abandoning his mistress and her mother, the butcher attempts to hitchhike, his voice-over stating:

No regrets. The child's better off dead than with those two retards. Fat momma must be hurting now. Yeah, I'd better not go back. Not tonight, not ever. Just cross it out. I'd rather struggle on my own than live with those freaks. I can't put up with all the world's misery. I'm going to start my life over, all alone, in Paris. And to make it, if I have to be bad, I'll be bad. Yes, real bad. I can do it. That's the only way to win. I've lost too much time as it is. And now, I've got a gun.

The butcher's relocation to Paris to start over forms another false start in the search for autonomy. Time is again brought to the fore, as this transition fuels a sense of urgency; following the butcher's attempts to borrow money and secure employment, we are aware of his dwindling money and growing desperation, the gun increasingly featuring in his narration as a symbol of liberation. Down to his final francs, and feeling humiliated at the constant rejection, the butcher contemplates how to best dispense the three bullets in his possession, voicing increasingly sadistic fantasies.

I want to spend some time now on the film's climax, as it is here that the pivotal shift from determinism to autonomy takes place, and where the film's depiction of moral relativism is at its most troubling. The shift that occurs here overturns the film's driving logic—that violence is the only means to autonomy. This is simultaneously an overturning of the determination of narrativised time: the difference between the butcher's sense of powerlessness in his opening recount of his life story where “events precipitate,” and that seizing control of one's trajectory through violence (by forcing your overbearing mistress to abort as a means to escape a future you do not want, for example). Where we have until now seen only failed attempts at self-determination (“Today, I'm resetting the counter,” “I'm going to start my life over, all alone, in Paris”), this shift to autonomy can only genuinely occur with the butcher's turning away from violence as a means to self-realisation, and turning away from the narrativisation of determined time by forcing events. In its place, the butcher comes to embrace the indeterminacy of the everyday, the acknowledgment of time in the non-cumulative sense. This is to accept the world as boundless, in contrast to one's attempts to impose order and meaning upon it. As suggested earlier, however, with this openness and surrender of defined meaning, come troubling implications.

Collecting his daughter from the psychiatric institution, on the premise that he wants to show her the Eiffel Tower, the butcher transports her instead back to the cheap hotel in which she was conceived. Interrupting their train journey is the motif jolting sound of a gunshot, and a title card reading: WARNING, followed by another, announcing: YOU HAVE 30 SECONDS TO LEAVE THE SCREENING OF THIS FILM. The seconds on-screen proceed to count down, over which the butcher's bleak narration continues. At four seconds, we get another title card reading: DANGER, which flashes alternately in red and black in time to an alarm sound building a sense of urgency. Once the timer has clocked out, another jolting gunshot sound prompts a final title card informing us that the proceeding images take place at: HOTEL OF THE FUTURE 23<sup>RD</sup> OF MARCH 1980, AROUND NOON. After this, the pacing slows again as the butcher and his daughter enter the hotel room. There is a brief series of static shots as Cynthia looks around slowly as though in wait for further instruction. The butcher's voice-over relays his loosely connected stream of consciousness, before he finds his resolve to kill them both. Calm as they are, these moments are pregnant with tension. Staring at his daughter with his gun in hand, the butcher's voiceover gives his justification: "Let's make this clear. The act of violence I must commit will be a wholesome act that will let us flee this machine with dignity." What follows (we later find out) takes place entirely in the butcher's imagination, a scenario in which he molests his daughter, before suddenly turning to shoot her from behind, the bullet entering her throat. At this moment, the cinematography shifts from static shots to a shuddering handheld, rapidly reframing with zooms, and cuts which quickly alternate between the butcher, and his daughter dying on the floor. It is a horrific and viscerally affecting scene as we watch Cynthia shaking and gasping for breath, wide-eyed and still conscious, her throat pulsing blood.

The sense of urgency rapidly escalates here; someone outside bangs at the door demanding entry; cuts are again accompanied by jolts of sound; the butcher's narration grows faster, contemplating Cynthia's suffering and bidding her to die as he debates whether to put the girl out of her misery with a bullet to the head, or to save it for one of his enemies. Eventually he pulls the trigger, killing her instantly. This violence too happens onscreen in gruesome detail, and sets off an even more manic voiceover of disjointed thoughts, words colliding in overlapping monologue. Beneath this chaos of narration, the butcher starts humming, though this sound too is layered with anguished groans and the sounds of rolling thunder. With his gun pressed to his throat, the butcher begins a countdown from ten; each number introducing another disconnected idea, steeling himself for death before finally pulling the trigger.

Conveyed in this climactic scene of violence is the boiling over of pressure that has been latent throughout. The accelerated and increasingly disjointed thought process being narrated, collision of sounds, rapid reframing of an unstable camera, and fleeting inserts of bloody images (a replay of Cynthia's brains exploding, a baby being born, the butcher's imagined suicide) compete for our attention. Noé overloads us with sensory information, feverishly piling up images and sounds to involve us in the butcher's deteriorating sanity. The sense of urgency and stress affected in this scene is exemplary of the "lapel grabbing kineticism" of Noé's style (Romney "Le Sex and Violence") that first garnered the interest in him as a bastion of a new extreme cinema. What interests me in this project, however, is the relationship between this instance of abrupt and horrific violence and its greater context in a film otherwise lodged in the ordinary.

Arresting as these moments are, the disturbing affect of *I Stand Alone* is not contained within its instances of extremism; rather, I argue that it emerges in its relation between this violence and the persistence of the quotidian in its wake. Following this cognitive assault, the film gains a renewed calm. We might again employ Lesley Stern's spectrum between the quotidian and the histrionic to describe the palpable shift that occurs. Putting his gun away, and iterating his need to remain a good man, it is revealed that the preceding violence was subjective; instead the butcher clutches his daughter close and breaks into tears, Pachelbel's Canon in D Major welling melodramatically on the soundtrack. In a callback to the opening barroom prologue, another title card—MORALITY—appears on screen before an insert we have seen before (suggesting it is possibly still occurring solely in the butcher's imagination), a close-up of the butcher's hand unbuttoning Cynthia's jacket and pushing his hand between her thighs. MAN IS MORAL is the final title card that we see before the film's end, a sunset over a peaceful street as the butcher muses about the future.

In relation to the horrific violence we have just witnessed, the film ends on a comparatively happy note. Standing alone on the balcony, the butcher stares into the distance before Cynthia appears and wraps her arms around him. The butcher nuzzles her hand affectionately with his chin before turning to face her, bowing his head into the child's shoulder and rubbing her breasts. His narration resumes, though for the first time in the film, it takes a positive tone. Where previously the butcher's voice-over had been characterised by its pessimistic determinism, the sense that everything was already tainted, here we see an openness to his rhetoric:

I don't know how today's going to end. But here with you, I exist. And I'm happy. Happier than ever. The rest doesn't matter. Maybe it's our last day. Or maybe not. Maybe I'll never shoot myself. Maybe I'll make love to you. And tomorrow I'll be locked up. Four months, a year or two. So what? Jail isn't the end of the world.

At this point, the camera begins tracking leftward, and cranes out to a quiet Parisian street at sunset. Birds fly in the distance.

If worse comes to worse, I can always hang myself. Whatever, even if they do lock me up, I'll have this moment to hold on to. And the satisfaction of fulfilling my desire instead of somebody else's. In the end, maybe my life has a meaning. To protect you. To bring you all the happiness that nobody else will ever give you. You are my little girl. And I will make of you... a woman.

A group of children skip and run along the footpath into the distance, laughing gleefully.

We'll do it. And we'll be happy. It will be our secret. In any event, whether we do it or not won't change the course of humanity. And for me, and for you, it'll change everything. People think they're free. But freedom doesn't exist. There are only laws that strangers have made for their own good, laws that bind me in unhappiness. And among these laws one says I must not love you because you are my daughter. And why? If they forbid us this love, it's surely not because it's evil. But because it's too powerful.

A little boy breaks away from the group and runs towards us, crossing the quiet street and continuing out of frame. The butcher's voiceover concludes:

Between us, that's all I can see. I love you. That's all there is to it.

We linger several seconds more to contemplate this pastoral image, a child still visible at play in the distance before the credits begin.



Fig. 39. Aestheticisation of the everyday—the closing of *I Stand Alone*.

What we see here is an aestheticisation of the everyday in coincidence with the butcher's acceptance of it. This concluding moment is both pleasurable and unsettling. After the sensory overload of violent images and jarring noises we have just been subjected to, it is hard not to be seduced by the beautiful image of a peaceful sunset on a quiet street. There is a palpable sense of relief as both camera and soundtrack have settled, and we are encouraged to absorb this moment, serene and picturesque. Likewise, the butcher's narration shifts from an alienated determinism, to a De Certeau-esque embracement of creative potential and the autonomy of choice. The fundamental dichotomy between surviving and living that the butcher wrestles with throughout the film is reconciled here with a shift in language from the decrees of genetic essentialism to the musing of the possibility of individual happiness.

The aestheticisation of the everyday in this way calls on the tradition of its positive conceptualisation—that is, the school of thought that asks one to be present and attentive to the ordinary and overlooked in order to appreciate its totality. Such a rendering of the everyday, however, risks being stripped of its very ordinariness, as Sheringham observes by “simply projecting onto the everyday values that are ultimately rooted in such non-everyday spheres as art, religion, or philosophy” (*Everyday Life* 28). An example from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is illustrative of this tendency in positive conceptions of the everyday:

I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. (68)

By equating the buzz of an insect with ancient epic poetry, Thoreau appeals to the profundity to be discovered in the ordinary, if only we take the time to acknowledge it. Noé's concluding image to *I Stand Alone*, with its poetic rendering of the sun setting on children at play against a Parisian skyline scattered with birds, seems to operate in a similar way; the evocative strings of Pachelbel's canon in the scene just gone and the long take contemplation of an ordinary but simultaneously beautiful landscape seem to draw on the same vocabulary, and yet the nostalgic appeal of this image is in tension with the knowledge that this evocation of relief, beauty and the perpetuity of the everyday is occurring alongside a man's resolution to sexually abuse his daughter.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter that *I Stand Alone* could be seen as at the opposite end of the spectrum to the likes of *The Seventh Continent* in terms of its stylistic treatment of violence. Where Haneke renders the suicide of an entire family as banal an activity as making breakfast, Noé's style is hysterical and aggressive. The disturbing quality of Haneke's film is due in part to a refusal to stylistically acknowledge the weight of such a tragic event, indeed to strip it of its eventfulness. Alternately, Noé's film, for a moment, seems to offer us a clear distinction between the dramatic and the ordinary in the revelation that the violence was imagined, and in the distinct transition between a nihilistic framing of the world to an embrace of its beauty and openness. What *I Stand Alone* shows in the persistence of the everyday after the surrender of a determinist framing however, is not a positive and creative everyday free of the constraints of an abstract and imposed narrative order, but an indeterminate everyday in which the abhorrence of child abuse can comfortably exist within the banal; MAN IS MORAL, but morality is relative, itself an abstract imposition, unanchored to a shared understanding of the world.

In showing us a world in which a man can sexually abuse his mute daughter in the same space as we watch gleeful and unaware children play below, Noé's conclusion operates less as a juxtaposition of opposites than as a suggestion that human abhorrence and innocence are all cut from the same fabric. I want to suggest that the vision we are given at the end of *I Stand Alone* evokes the imagery of a positive conception of the everyday, in order to undermine it as naïve. The everyday that persists at the film's conclusion is not Thoreau's revelation at the beauty and pleasure to be garnered by acknowledging the ordinary. It is rather an unsettling and seemingly contradictory blend of beauty and horror, an everyday which is not beholden to the narrativisation we attempt to impose in order to reconcile it to a clear and tangible meaning.

This idea that the beautiful and the abhorrent are intermingled within the quotidian, is more closely aligned with the everyday evoked towards the ending of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* than the exaltations of Thoreau's *Walden*. In contrast to the extract from Thoreau quoted earlier, the following passage from *Lolita* is powerfully evocative of the kind of everyday Noé represents at the film's end—a complex image where the richness and charm of the quotidian is underscored by the base and repugnant. In this passage, the protagonist Humbert recalls a time many years past, just after the adolescent girl he has coveted has escaped.

One day, soon after her disappearance, an attack of abominable nausea forced me to pull upon the ghost of an old mountain road that now accompanied, now traversed a brand new highway, with its population of asters bathing in the detached warmth of a pale-blue afternoon in late summer. After coughing myself inside out, I rested a while on a boulder, and then, thinking the sweet air might do me good, walked a little way toward a low stone parapet on the precipice side of the highway. Small grasshoppers spurted out of the withered roadside weeds. A very light cloud was opening its arms and moving toward a slightly more substantial one belonging to another, more sluggish, heavenlogged system. As I approached the friendly abyss, I grew aware of a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold in the valley. One could make out the geometry of the streets between blocks of red and grey roofs, and green puffs of trees, and a serpentine stream, and the rich, ore-like glitter of the city dump, and beyond the town, roads crisscrossing the crazy quilt of dark and pale fields, and behind it all, great timbered mountains. But even brighter than those quietly rejoicing colors—for there are colours and shades that seem to enjoy themselves in good company—both brighter and dreamier to the ear than they were to the eye, was that vapoury vibration of accumulated sounds that never ceased for a moment, as it rose to the lip of granite where I stood wiping my foul mouth. And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (Nabokov 305-6)

Functioning in the same aesthetic vein as Noé's conclusion to *I Stand Alone*, Nabokov's style here imbues the details of the everyday with an enchantment born of their familiarity, reminiscent of positive conceptions of the everyday. Even so, the allure of this depiction cannot help but be haunted by the presence of its paedophile narrator, who is simultaneously separate from the world we occupy—it is from his distant vantage point that he observes the mechanisms of the world around him, but indeed the very conduit for our access to it.

The problem Noé raises for us at *I Stand Alone*'s conclusion is in calling us to question the everyday we are left with at the film's close, in comparison to the everyday we entered at the film's beginning, and the significance of the transition. The film's closing long take invites our contemplation; Noé gives us the contrast between the calls of children at play in the street (gesturing towards a world that goes on), and Cynthia who is literally without a voice and whose future, indeed if she can have one at all, is at the hands of her father who had planned to murder her only moments earlier. It is a mixture of the simultatenously familiar and uncertain, the beauty of its openness and the terrible knowledge of what this openness means. Is this vision of an open everyday actually any better than the bleak but ordered world we were presented with at the start with its clear trajectory, Darwinian vocabulary, and potential for closure? The butcher's understanding has taken a fundamental turn, and yet, one wonders if this makes any difference in a world where concepts like morality are still unanchored to any shared meaning. Noé calls our attention to an everyday closer to that outside of the cinema: one that is open, indeterminate, circadian and not beholden to the narratives we impose to master it.

By representing the everyday in this way, *I Stand Alone* challenges the narrative we bring that violence and dramatic moments are isolatable and knowable, the lightning as opposed to the banal. Instead it depicts the everyday to be indeterminate—a complex and open mixture of high and low, indifferent to the narratives we impose because cyclic time is perpetual. Where *I Stand Alone* stylistically marks a clear shift from a linear conception of everyday time to a cyclic conception, and its undermining of narrative comes in showing this transition, Marcus Schleizer's *Michael*, by contrast, reveals the everyday to be a mixture of banality and horror within its first few minutes. Instead of a shift, the progression of *Michael* deepens our understanding of just how entwined these seeming opposites are. However, as I will show, what Schleizer's film also shares with *I Stand Alone* is the reassertion of cyclical time after the eventful and violent disruption as a means to destabilise the organising narratives we impose on the world and to foreclose our attempts to make sense of it.

### ***Michael***

*Michael* opens with an evening in the life of its protagonist—a thirty-something year old man pulls his car into the garage, and shuffles his groceries inside. He fries ham in the kitchen while the television news plays in the background. A view from the house's exterior shows electronically operated roller shutters slowly descending for the evening. Back inside, we watch as Michael



fastidiously lays the dining room table for two. In the next shot, he unlocks and pulls open a heavy blue door, which opens onto darkness. We wait a moment staring in silence at the open doorway before Michael can be heard off-screen, “Come on.” Again we wait; close to ten seconds pass before a small boy of about ten (listed in the credits as Wolfgang) slowly steps into the light. Frustrated, Michael pulls Wolfgang out, and prompts him upstairs. Over dinner, the boy asks permission to watch television, and after the pair washes their plates together, they do. Illuminated by the screen, Michael consults his watch before rising, “that’s enough.” Wolfgang tries to bargain for more time, but this is denied and he slowly stands, eyes fixed to the television trying to absorb as much as possible before he is sent back to the locked room. The remainder of the evening is depicted in fragments—upstairs, Michael reclines watching television, snacks from the fridge, has a cigarette outside, and brushes his teeth, before heading downstairs with a bottle of lubricant, closing the big blue door behind him. The camera remains fixed on the door for a few seconds before a cut to Michael washing his penis in the bathroom sink tacitly confirms what we already know. In the next shot, Michael marks the occasion in a day planner with a small symbol (see fig. 40), replacing the book in a drawer before Schleizer cuts to the opening title.

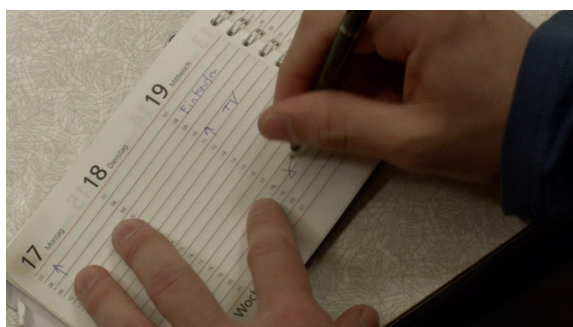


Fig. 40. The horrific as ordinary in *Michael*

Established in this opening sequence is the film’s relationship to everyday time, privileging the micro-detail of the quotidian with a kind of attention, seen in *Jeanne Dielman*, to that which usually forms the background for the eventful in films. Focusing on the relationship between the kidnapped child and his abusive captor, much of *Michael*’s ninety-six minute running time is spent tracing the banal day-to-day. Dramatic events are either elided completely—as with the sexual abuse in the opening sequence—or represented with the kind of stylistic flattening observed in Haneke and Bresson’s films in chapter three. The repetition of actions and settings creates a sense of perpetuity: Michael’s car entering and leaving the garage; the slow descent of the garage’s roller door and the

house's window shutters; shared meals at the dining room table; washing up; Michael watching television; smoking cigarettes; preparing for bed before the bathroom mirror; the opening and shutting of the blue door to Wolfgang's room; Wolfgang drawing pictures or playing alone are all recurrent images, calling attention to the way the horror of the eventful is realised within the ordinary.

Stylistically, the film is greatly indebted to the work of Haneke, for whom Schleizer worked as a casting director on several films, and whom is thanked in *Michael's* closing credits. Schleizer adopts Haneke's sparing and distanced aesthetic; the film's attention to the banal, fragmented and observational style, cool colour palette, reluctance to provide access to character interiority, and reliance on diegetic sound, render a depiction of daily life that has much in common with *The Seventh Continent*. Like Haneke and Bresson's stylistic levelling of the eventful with the banal as explored in chapter three, *Michael's* flattening of child sexual abuse into the progression of mundane domestic routine (literally so in the opening sequence, with the registering of it in a diary under an earlier entry: "TV") deflates the sense of drama such horror seems to demand. Rather than occupying a separate dramatic space, the abuse is represented through its equation with the ordinary. Not only does the transition from the closed door to a shot of Michael washing his genitals confirm what has occurred off-screen, there is an added cruelty in its curtness; what should be a horrific and dramatic event (even if it is not shown) is profaned further by its equation with the banal in the simple pragmatism of hygiene. Such a transition works to make the horrific present through its absence, and in turn the very ordinariness of washing oneself is contaminated. Like Bresson's displacement of violence onto everyday objects in *Money*, *Michael* plays the revelation of violence through the everyday as a kind of recurring manoeuvre throughout its duration. However, where Schleizer's film differs is in the varied manifestations of this device and how it comes to deepen our perception of the latent violence in the quotidian as the film continues. I would like to highlight some key instances in which this kind of move is affected, before exploring how the film's relationship to everyday time works towards its undermining of the narratives we bring to it, and our desire for closure.

In addition to the Bressonian elision of the dramatic, we see the horrific expressed through the everyday in the sheer ease with which the two seemingly opposite poles coexist, and even compliment one another. Primarily this is evidenced in Michael's personality and engagement with others. Though not encouraged as a source of identification, Michael is hardly represented as a

monster. Unassuming and private, Michael manages to keep up appearances with his family and colleagues with what appears to be the bare minimum of interaction—exchanging gifts with his sister at Christmas, reticent small talk at his work as an insurance salesman, and a ski trip with male friends. Ironically, this same circumspect temperament that helps to conceal his crime makes him the ideal candidate for a promotion at work.

As a pair, Michael and Wolfgang's interactions are so habitual—they eat meals together, clean, watch television, play, do jigsaw puzzles etc.—that in many ways their relationship resembles that of father and son. This is emphasised on an outing to a zoo, when Michael and Wolfgang blend inconspicuously with other families. Beyond calling attention to the congruence of the ordinary with the horrific, this sequence takes a step further to highlight our need for these poles to remain separate, and our discomfort in their ambiguity. On a walking trail Michael and Wolfgang cross another man and boy, Wolfgang turning his head curiously after they have passed by. The uncertainty sparked in this moment, the suspicion that they too might not be what they seem, is one that thwarts an attempt to isolate Michael and Wolfgang's bond as other; instead, this move, like the bar room prologue in *I Stand Alone*, implies the potential for violence in the everyday as ubiquitous.

The film is characterised by this entwining of the horrific and the everyday, not as a recurrent move that steadily divorces violence from meaning (as we see in Bresson's *Money*), but as one that works to deepen our understanding of its interconnectedness. Another example of this comes in a sequence that gradually reveals the intention for violence through ordinary objects. Walking through the children's bedroom section at a furniture store, Michael pauses momentarily to inspect a bright red racing car-shaped bed emblazoned with flames before moving on. We cut to Michael and Wolfgang assembling a bunk bed in the latter's bedroom. "There's a piece missing" Wolfgang points out. Michael holds the frame while Wolfgang searches for it. In the next shot, Wolfgang is alone, his little hands making decorations—a childish multi-coloured bunting out of crepe paper and string, which he proceeds to fix to the bed frame with sticky tape. Sat on a play mat by the bed's base Wolfgang concentrates, sorting children's books into two piles. One pile is carried to the top bunk and placed on a folded blanket.

If we have not already attuned to the significance of these objects, the following scene lays bare their purpose. From the quiet of Wolfgang's bedroom, we cut to the roar of speeding go-carts at an

indoor track. Michael wanders the perimeter, stopping now and then to converse with young boys watching the race. Finally, a cut takes us outdoors, as Michael crosses the car park, a small boy in tow, the two engaged in a conversation about radio-controlled cars. “Mine’s all red. With sort of flames on the side... Maybe we can race sometime?” Michael says. We watch them stroll a fair way from the venue before an off-screen voice—the boy’s father—beckons him back, reprimanding him for wandering off. Michael continues walking at a steady pace, head bowed, making a casual escape. Back in Wolfgang’s room, Michael must deliver the news: “The telephone rang just as I got in and they said the other boy couldn’t come today. It’s a shame. After we tidied everything up so nicely.” A reverse shot shows Wolfgang, sat on the lower bunk, head bowed in a frown of disappointment. “Don’t be sad, OK?” Wolfgang shuffles slightly, his lower lip alternately pursing and relaxing as though to keep from crying.

There is of course, the gradual horror at realising Michael’s true intentions in shopping for, and then constructing a new bed in Wolfgang’s room. The red racing-car bed that we see in the furniture store—what we might reasonably assume could be a present for Wolfgang—is instead revealed to have been recruited into Michael’s imagination to an even more troubling end: a very nearly effective lure of another victim. And yet, as with the pair’s encounter with strangers on the nature trail, I argue that Schleizer’s entanglement of violence and the everyday unsettles attempts at containment and clarity. That is, the film presents the everyday as already, and always contaminated by violence and its potential. So entwined are these two things that the dramatic locus of the scene is divided between the threat of further abuse, and the day-to-day scenario of having to manage a young child’s disappointment.

This analysis has so far been discussing the recurring move of Schleizer’s film to reveal violence as intrinsic to the ordinary in a variety of ways. What really extends our understanding of this dynamic, however, is the film’s treatment of everyday time as circadian, in subtle but deeply troubling ways. It seems we are following the characters for a few consecutive months; about a third of the way through the film, we watch Michael and Wolfgang spend Christmas together, and towards the film’s end Michael is killed, an event that the priest conducting his funeral announces to have occurred on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February. In contrast to *I Stand Alone*, however, *Michael* is far less explicit in providing us a gauge by which to measure narrative duration. This lack of clarity is itself significant to the film’s affect, for, subtle indications of the perpetuity of Michael and Wolfgang’s time together are themselves instances of the film’s signature move that filters horror through the

banal. Like the abrupt cut that casually elides the abuse in the opening sequence, these moments are acerbic in their lack of emphasis. In one instance, Wolfgang watches silently as Michael hammers a cut Christmas tree into its base. Turning from his work to meet Wolfgang's sullen gaze, Michael's words are simple and cutting for their revelation that this is most likely not their first Christmas together: "Why don't you fetch the decorations for once? The boxes are in the hallway."

Perhaps the most potent example however, occurs early in the film when we start to get a sense of Wolfgang's routine. One gathers that, for the most part, the boy is left to his own devices in his bedroom, an always locked but large, self-sufficient space complete with bed, toilet, sink, toys and food stores. A fragmented look at how Wolfgang spends his time when not in Michael's company sees him reading, waiting for the kettle to boil in preparing an instant meal, playing with toys, drawing, and writing a letter to his parents. Presumably the following day, we watch Wolfgang wrapped in a towel, holding the envelope containing his letter and drawing, while Michael carefully trims the boy's hair. In the following shot Michael sits alone, examining the envelope's contents. A cut transports us to the basement, Michael placing the envelope in a box full of undelivered letters—at least fifty—before restoring the box to its concealed home on the shelf (see fig. 41).



Fig. 41. Horror filtered through the banal – the casual reveal of Wolfgang's many letters in *Michael*

Again there is a callous weight to the nonchalance of these moments which call attention to the indifference of circadian time, this indifference being key to the films in this chapter's disturbing affect in their calling attention to the fallacy of projected narratives. In a sense, *Michael* internalises this dynamic through Wolfgang's letters—the narrative evidently constructed for him by Michael who has told him they are being passed on, and a narrative that Wolfgang believes, or convinces himself to believe despite doubts to the contrary. This is revealed in a scene where, over dinner, Wolfgang recounts a news story he saw on television about the financial crisis and suggests that

Michael may lose his job. Michael's typically blank composure shifts to simmering rage and in an act of abject cruelty he retaliates by retrieving one of the boy's past letters, hitting him in the face with it. "Do you know what this is? It's your letter. Your parents don't even want to read it. And they don't want you to write any more. They've given away all your stuff and rented out your room. They're not interested in you anymore." He shoves the letter into Wolfgang's face repeatedly during this rant, before dropping the open envelope onto the boy's plate and returning to his seat. "And they said you should behave and do as I say," Michael concludes. Removing the letter from his plate, the boy stares downward with brow furrowed to keep from crying. For a silent moment he fidgets with the piece of bread on his plate, before emitting in a tiny voice, soft with pity, "That's all made up anyway." The delivery of these words, perhaps the act of enunciating something he has long suspected, seem to revitalise his anguish and his facial muscles show great effort to refrain from bursting into tears. This scene is heartbreaking not only for its cruelty in watching a child's realisation or acceptance, whatever it may be, play out on a face that strains to not betray his loss of composure, but because immediately after, we cut to the pair in the kitchen where life goes on. Wolfgang, seemingly reconciled for now, discards his letter in the bin before continuing to assist with the evening's cleaning routine.

Implied by the compatibility of violence and the everyday in *Michael* is that the separation of public and private spheres, the rituals of the everyday, and the systems we erect to maintain order and ward off chaos, have the dual function of perpetuating that which we seek to avoid. To return to Roger Silverstone whom I quoted in chapter one, we might think of the institutions and rituals we construct as a means to "ontological security" (Silverstone 19), and yet Schleinker's film deals in the suggestion that these constructs are as much a potential incubator for violence as an inoculation against it. On the one hand we get a kind of inversion of the everyday; Michael's limiting of his involvement with others to conceal his crime is threatened by the humanity of those around him—on more than one occasion he rejects offers for the company of family members, and is almost discovered when a colleague who repeatedly tries to befriend him drops by his home unexpectedly. And yet, this is not to suggest that the film portrays the everyday as negative; it is not a matter of drawing a dichotomy between the alienating aspects of daily life, and the absence of an open attendance to its beauty. Michael and Wolfgang's everyday is unsettling and off-kilter precisely because it is so functional. The repetitions of the everyday that a negative conception would posit as the source of alienation, in *Michael* serve a dual function. The same constructs that allow for the abuse to continue (by insulating the domestic sphere from outsiders and maintaining a façade of normality) are integral to giving Wolfgang a sense of structure and continuity.

*Michael* entwines the banal and the horrific throughout, showing them to be inseparable. However, I argue that the power of this move, its grip on us is affected by the attention called to everyday time as circadian and indifferent. While the film displays various moments of disruption which seem to threaten the integrity of the pair's dynamic—Wolfgang falls gravely ill, Michael is unexpectedly hit by a car while crossing a busy street, and later is in danger of being stranded in the snow on a skiing trip—none of these events prove to be of great consequence. Rather they serve as minor interruptions, soon absorbed by the endurance of the ordinary. I want to turn now to the film's conclusion, as in keeping with the majority of my corpus of films, *Michael* features a violent disruption to the everyday towards its end.

Feeling upbeat after his promotion party in the office, Michael returns home. Wolfgang is acting out, roaring and stomping about his room, jumping and swaying with excess energy, poking and clawing playfully at Michael who reacts with frustrated confusion. Michael delivers a left over piece of cake, telling the boy not to eat it all before dinner, before going upstairs to have a cigarette, and prepare the table. In the meantime we watch Wolfgang fill the kettle with water and place it to boil. Because we have spent so much of the film watching its characters fill time, nothing seems amiss here, however its significance is revealed when Michael opens the door to summon Wolfgang to dinner, the latter casting a jug full of boiling water into Michael's face. Wolfgang, seemingly shocked by himself hesitates for a moment before making a run for the door, only to be blocked and after a scuffle, thrown back into the bedroom where Michael manages to lock the child inside. Shivering with pain and almost blind, Michael showers himself with cold water before frantically struggling to place his key into the car's ignition. Traversing a dark and empty road the car collides with a fence, flipping over an embankment and landing upside down, its headlights dimming to nothing. We are given a few seconds to process this, the shot remaining on the darkness, with only a few tiny lights flickering on the horizon to maintain a sense of space. In the next shot a recovery mission is already well under way, a fixed wide shot illuminated by the lights of various emergency vehicles. Any shock of discovery or sense of urgency has been elided. Instead we are privy to a long take tableau of men at work, enacting the routine process of clearing a crash scene. To the right of frame, a pair of emergency workers load a sealed metal casket into the back of a van, while members of the fire department attach the wreckage to a truck-mounted crane. At the other edge of the frame, two police officers converse with a fire fighter though we cannot hear their words for the roar of idle trucks and the hauling machinery. Noticing the van removing the corpse has left the scene, one of the policemen extinguishes his cigarette to direct traffic.

The event of most consequence—the sudden death of the film’s protagonist—is but a fleeting moment, already being cleared away. Its dramatic value is quickly deflected by its replacement with the obligatory processes it instigates. Structurally, the film enacts the ambiguity of everyday time as simultaneously eventful and non-cumulative, progressive and perennial.

Calling our attention to the endurance of the everyday, the film’s final scenes follow Michael’s family as they enact the necessary rituals and routines following sudden death. From the clearing of the accident site, we cut to an image of Michael’s mother, sat at a table littered with folded funeral invitations. Her red-rimmed eyes glisten, betraying recently shed tears and with head bowed, she sits almost perfectly still, completely absorbed in her grief. We watch her for a long time before the sound of the telephone jars the silence, stirring her back into motion. There is a slight shaking of her head, as though she is reorienting herself having been somewhere far away, as one who has been awoken prematurely from a bad dream. This is not the last time we will see her attention drift involuntarily. Later, while scrubbing the kitchen sink in her son’s home, the gradual shift of her attention is legible as her motion slows to a standstill, her hand dropping as though acknowledging defeat. Her head droops and there is pause while her face displays resignation to silent sadness; this is interrupted though when she raises a hand to wipe her nose. These scenes of banal but necessary tasks that follow Michael’s death—funeral arrangements, cleaning, emptying the overflowing mail box, sorting through clothes—are perhaps the hardest to watch. It is not just that our attention is called to the persistence of the everyday, we are made to attend to the weight of this persistence on the characters that remain. There is a palpable disparity between the gravity of this event on this family, and the pitiless endurance of the world around them. Like the cruel simplicity of Michael’s collection of Wolfgang’s letters, the indifference of circadian time is encapsulated in an image of Michael’s mother and brother in law struggling with the accumulation of junk mail—that impersonal and disposable detritus of consumer culture—filling the letter box and jammed around the gate handle outside Michael’s house. That these moments vest cyclical time with a sense of cruelty, attests to the expectations we place in the narratives we impose upon our own everyday, outside the cinema.

A key thread that links all of the films in this thesis is the eruption of violence into the everyday and the inability to fasten violent instances to a secure meaning that would allow us to contain them. Drawing on Kermode’s argument about the narrativisation of experience, the means by which we assimilate disruption and the unexpected into our sense of the world and understanding of our place



within it, I have been contending that the films in this chapter both draw our attention to the dual structure of everyday time as simultaneously linear and cyclical, and the way this is used to point out the fallacy of these narratives we impose. Schleizer's film makes explicit this human quest to impose meaning, and the folly of that attempt in a scene towards its end, which depicts Michael's funeral. "What should...what can...his death mean to us?" asks the young priest conducting the ceremony. "Doesn't an early death—whether caused by illness or by a road accident—seem almost contrary to the ways of life?" After a pause: "I say no." The priest justifies this position by drawing on an anecdote about Michael's childhood impatience, suggesting that perhaps God grew impatient with Michael, thus beckoning him sooner than expected. In part comfort to the aggrieved who are yet to discover Michael's crime, the priest manages in a brief sermon to all too neatly tie up the meaning of Michael's death, relating the unexpected horror of a violent auto accident to a benign episode from Michael's boyhood. Schleizer highlights the feebleness of this ritual with an abrupt cut midsentence during the priest's conclusion: "Saying farewell to Michael means—"

The weight of the inexorable progress of time in these final scenes is not just felt through our access to the family's anguish, but through our knowledge that Wolfgang, unattended and quite possibly injured in the scuffle with Michael, is still locked in the basement. The key question as to his wellbeing, indeed whether or not he is even still alive, is never answered. Interestingly, the film's ending seems to acknowledge a kind of structural inversion of our typical experience of such stories in our day-to-day lives; the discovery of horror is usually the catalyst for the media excavation of its extent, however Schleizer's film concludes at the moment of revelation. Amidst sorting through Michael's belongings, his mother walks downstairs in search of more boxes and bags. Later in the day she ventures down again, this time noticing the locked blue door. Teasingly, the film ends, cutting to black when she has opened it just wide enough to peer inside, a deliberate frustration to the viewer's want of closure.

## Conclusion

By not only giving us the shock of sudden violent disruption, but by contemplating the everyday's absorption of it in the persistence of a world indifferent, the films in this chapter call attention to the nature of everyday time and the narrative parameters we impose in order to make it mean. In differing ways, both *I Stand Alone* and *Michael* highlight our need to impose a concordant narrative structure to human experience, to vest it with meaning and render it tolerable. Their capacity for disturbing affect, however, comes in the undermining of these narratives, elucidating the naïveté of

our credulity in them. Further, the culminating violence that seems to imperil the ordinary, the perepetia that defies expectations, that we feel should enlighten us to something real (Kermode *The Sense of an Ending* 18), is instead absorbed into “the eternal, pitiless recurrence of things” (Braudel *On History* 11).

The duality of everyday time evoked in *I Stand Alone* and *Michael*—both eventful and linear, but simultaneously non-cumulative and enduring—encapsulates the everyday’s fundamental indeterminacy. Everyday time is a paradox, as Blanchot recognises, nothing happens, but something is always happening (241). By presenting and then undermining the narratives we impose to make the everyday meaningful, *I Stand Alone* and *Michael* evoke the pull/ push dynamic, throwing the extreme and the everyday into tension in varying ways. In Noé’s film, the narrativisation of time is an oppressive weight, inflicted on the viewer via the butcher’s vitriolic and self-fulfilling declarations of the world’s harsh indifference, culminating in his seizing control via decisive, violent action. Where the overturning of this logic as realised in the film’s closing moments ostensibly offers a welcome release—palpable in the film’s radical shift in aesthetic—the film’s disturbing affect comes in the troubling implication that to surrender one’s belief in a concordant structure is to accept the everyday as indeterminate and not beholden to one’s imposed expectations of it. Schleinker’s film, by contrast, assumes the ambiguity of the everyday from its opening moments, presenting us with a world in which the violent and the banal are already and always entangled. Deepening our understanding of this dynamic through a motif gesture that in varied ways filters the horrific through the ordinary, the film incites our want for these to be isolated opposites, while continually eroding our attempts to render them such.

By showing the endurance of the everyday in the wake of disruptive violence, what a return to the everyday might look like, and indeed throwing into doubt the very notion that the everyday and violence are at all separate, these films make explicit what is implicit in the films discussed in previous chapters—that is, the fallacy of the stories we tell to make sense of our time in *media res*. These films point to something beyond themselves, showing us what is ventured in giving up that narrative safety of eventful, concordant time and accepting the experience of a world that is not beholden to cosmic laws of right and wrong that might be answered, ultimately a world that appears as “puzzling, indeterminate, ambiguous, and without a guiding structure” (Wilson *Narration in Light* 90). In presenting us with a vision of a world that persists unabated, part of the purchase these films have on our imagination and experience is in their giving cause to reflect on the susceptibility

of our own everyday outside of the cinema, and to question precisely what is at stake in our narrativisation of time as a means of insulation from indeterminacy.

## Conclusion

The ordinary throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, denials, practical solutions, shape-shifting forms of violence, daydreams, and opportunities lost or found.

Or it falters, fails.

But either way we feel its pull. (Stewart *Ordinary Affects* 29)

While since the late 1990s there has been an abundance of research into the new extremes of sex and violence in contemporary European art cinema and rhetoric regarding its malignant affective potential, little has been said of the everyday that frames these moments. This thesis has aimed to redress this gap by offering the first detailed examination of the relationship between representations of violence and the quotidian within European art cinema. In attempting to grasp the kind of affect these films produce, I have proposed the term “disturbing” to point to a discernable aesthetic imperative that engages viewers, only to abruptly repel them through sudden bursts of extreme violence. Specifically, I am addressing what I have identified to be a recurrent dynamic enacted through style and structure that works to preclude aesthetic and narrative closure by preventing the viewer from adequately ascribing coherent meaning to instances of violence, gesturing towards something profound but ultimately indeterminate. By positing that the everyday is just as vital to the affective quality of these films as their moments of violence, and that it is indeed the tension between these two that generates disturbing affect, this thesis has endeavoured to offer a unique contribution to the field and an alternate approach to understanding what has been denoted as extreme cinema.

In my introduction, I sought to map a diverse field of critical and scholarly interpretations of an even more disparate group of European films—united not by a distinct movement or genre, but the provocative employment of graphic sex and extreme violence, and the wilful subjection of viewers to uncomfortable affective experiences. Intersecting with this criticism and scholarship, my own research argued that where interpretations of this tendency in European cinema emphasised moments of extremity (in representation and spectator response), that the everyday settings, situations and aesthetics that occupies the majority of the duration of these films had been neglected. I argued that essential to the affective power of moments of extremity, particularly violence, was the tension between such extremes and the everyday that framed it.

Seeking to understand the relationship between the extreme and the everyday, and to reframe the way in which we might approach the affective potential of extreme cinema, chapter two explored

what I took to be an implicit dynamic at work in the reception of cinematic extremes: the distinction between an immediate visceral response, and a more pervasive, and enduring kind of affect. Chapter two considered this dynamic in relation to the concept of the extreme as something necessarily of the moment, indebted to a history of transgression but always being revitalised. Regarding the everyday as a “bridging position,” I argued that two significant lines of continuity link extreme European cinema past and present. The first of these is the tendency on the part of critics and scholars to frame these films in a discourse of immediacy—that is, to privilege immediate visceral responses such as shock, outrage and disgust to works of extremity when articulating the kinds of affect these films produce. Secondly, I argued that the pull/ push dynamic that pitches the everyday and the extreme into tension, frustrating the viewer’s attempts to clarify violent events, that I take to be so important to later works, is indeed observable in earlier examples of extreme European cinema, albeit in more discreet ways. This chapter revealed that despite their seeming disconnect from the everyday, notorious works of extreme European cinema such as Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and Elem Klimov’s *Come and See* (1985) employed a tension between the everyday and extreme in the generation of disturbing affect. Further, because both films are firmly located within times of war and trauma, their gestures towards the ordinary are all the more remarkable in their seeming incongruence in the otherwise extraordinary worlds depicted, signalling that the distinction between the extreme and the everyday is not necessarily clear cut.

This notion that violence and the everyday are isolatable and mutually exclusive is one of the key assumptions promulgated in prior criticism that this thesis has sought to redress. The desire to keep a tidy distinction between the quotidian and extreme becomes a primary concern for theorists of everyday film style. In chapter three I demonstrated that attempts to establish a binary between an everyday style and the dramatic in cinema were based on questionable criteria—the everyday and dramatic being more fluid than previous scholarship has acknowledged. Further, this chapter argued for a broader conception of the everyday, contending that the inclination of studies into everyday cinema style to quarantine the everyday as a pure and positive realm was reductive. Chapter three considered the tenets of dominant approaches to everyday cinema style, and the limitations of rigid definitions when accounting for films such as Robert Bresson’s *Money* (1983) and Michael Haneke’s *The Seventh Continent* (1989), which while not as narratively or stylistically restrained as such an approach would demand, could hardly be said to tend towards the melodramatic. In response to prominent arguments regarding the everyday as a cinema aesthetic, and drawing on the scholarship of Lesley Stern, chapter three proposed an approach to everyday cinema style that

considered the quotidian and the dramatic, not as isolated, but as existing on a spectrum, therefore allowing for shifts in degree and nuance.

Engaging with criticism surrounding disturbing European cinema also revealed that the need to ascribe meaning to violence exists not just on the part of the viewer, but is part of the critical discourse that frames these films. From the frustration of critics at the perceived meaninglessness of violence, to scholars who project tidy but unsubstantiated explanations to dispel ambiguous character and authorial motivation, the need to impose coherence, consistently framed discussion of disturbing cinema. Chapter four in particular, examined the way Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl* (2001) and Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003) with a radical shift from the banal to the violent in their closing minutes had been approached and often dismissed in criticism—citing illegible breaks either in genre or in authorial concerns. Unpacking these arguments and shifting focus from the violence itself as the locus of disturbing affect to the relationship between this violence and the nuanced framing of the everyday that leads up to it, I argued that close attention to the way the films orient our involvement is crucial to their affective potential.

Finally, chapter five considered how an understanding of everyday time as both eventful and circadian illuminates the patterning of violence and the banal in disturbing film, as well as the narratives we bring to bear on our own experience of the everyday outside of the cinema. Taking Gaspar Noé's *I Stand Alone* (1998) and Markus Schleizer's *Michael* (2011) as case studies, I argued that by precluding closure and showing what a return to the everyday after violent interruption might look like, these films make explicit the perpetuity and indifference of the everyday, undermining our attempts to make sense of the circadian, and giving cause to reflect on our own everyday and its susceptibility to disruption. Indeed, the films examined in this thesis emphasise that the everyday is not a mere backdrop for the eventful, but the necessary medium within which such violence or unpleasantness *has* to take place.

Having articulated the dynamic by which we are attracted and repelled by these films as the catalyst for disturbing affect, this thesis undertook to explore the various ways it played out, identifying the key formal and structural mechanisms employed. These pertained to spectatorial address, stylistic lack of acknowledgment of, or preparation for, moments of violence, the structural orientation of viewer experience only to radically subvert it, and the films' relationship to everyday time. In order

to understand these formal and structural devices, I sought to engage with the films, as Clayton would say, on their “own terms” (“Coming to Terms” 36) by closely attending to film style. While I have often drawn on theories of the everyday, it has been in the interest of illuminating the grip of these films on our experience, rather than to impose an abstract framework to which they need conform. Indeed, I have found the concept of the everyday’s indeterminacy useful in articulating the openness of disturbing films and their affective quality which is necessarily based on a withholding of meaning and clarification.

There is, of course, scope to develop these observations further; I have deliberately limited my corpus to a number of films representative of a specific kind of affect. There are, however, other films that share the central concerns of violence and the everyday, but whose affect is bound up with pitch-black humour—for example *Man Bites Dog/ C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (Belvaux, Bonzel and Poelvoorde 1992), *Cargo 200/ Gruz 200* (Balabanov 2007), and *Dogtooth/ Kynodontas* (Lathimos 2009). Likewise I have avoided looking at peripheral films that employ supernatural elements, or where the fantastical impinges on the everyday: *Taxidermia* (Pálfi 2006), and Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011). Furthermore, just as the new extremity was only for a short time considered an anomaly localised to French cinema, I anticipate there is further scope to look at disturbing affect in cinemas outside of Europe.

What unites the films I have discussed in this thesis is the conversation that is struck between the ordinary and the eventful, the banal and those brief but acutely registered disruptions that tear a fissure in our understanding and gesture towards something beyond themselves. That these moments manage to throw us not only into some immediate visceral response but one that permeates our experience after the films have ended is telling of just what is at stake in the expectations we hold and the stories we tell. Such moments seem bound to convey something educative—to elucidate the narrative, better yet the world we take such narratives to reflect. That these moments consistently refuse to reveal their purpose, to be the “lightning that illuminates the banal” is intensely seductive. But it is also deeply troubling.

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### List of Films Consulted

*71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance/ 71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* (Dir. Michael Haneke 1994)

*An Andalusian Dog/ Un chien Andalou* (Dir. Luis Buñuel 1929)

*Anatomy of Hell/ Anatomie de l'enfer* (Dir. Catherine Breillat 2004)

*Antichrist* (Dir. Lars von Trier 2009)

*Atonement* (Dir. Joe Wright 2007)

*Benny's Video* (Dir. Michael Haneke 1992)

*Blazing Saddles* (Dir. Mel Brooks 1971)

*Blue* (Dir. Derek Jarman 1993)

*Cargo 200/ Gruz 200* (Dir. Aleksey Balabanov 2007)

*Carne* (Dir. Gaspar Noé 1991)

*Citizen Kane* (Dir. Orson Welles 1941)

*A Clockwork Orange* (Dir. Stanley Kubrick 1971)

*Code Unknown/ Code Inconnu* (Dir. Michael Haneke 2000)

*Come and See/ Idi i smotri* (Dir. Elem Klimov 1985)

*Deliverance* (Dir. John Boorman 1972)

*Diary of a Country Priest/ Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Dir. Robert Bresson 1951)

*Dogtooth/ Kynodontas* (Dir. Giorgos Lanthimos 2009)

*Dogville* (Dir. Lars von Trier 2003)

*Drum* (Dir. Steve Carver 1976)

*Duel* (Dir. Steven Spielberg 1971)

*Escalator* (Dir. Thomas Demand 2001)

*Eyes Wide Shut* (Dir. Stanley Kubrick 1999)

*Fat Girl/ À ma soeur!* (Dir. Catherine Breillat 2001)

*Fish Tank* (Dir. Andrea Arnold 2009)

*From Dusk Till Dawn* (Dir. Robert Rodriguez 1996)

*Frontier(s)/ Frontière(s)* (Dir. Xavier Gens 2007)

*Fuck Me/ Baise-moi* (Dirs. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi 2000)

*Funny Games* (Dir. Michael Haneke 1997)

*Funny Games* (Dir. Michael Haneke 2007)

*A Gentle Woman/ Une femme douce* (Dir. Robert Bresson 1969)

*Ginger Snaps* (Dir. John Fawcett 2000)

*Hidden/ Caché* (Dir. Michael Haneke 2005)

*High Tension/ Haute tension* (Dir. Alexandre Aja 2003)

*His Girl Friday* (Dir. Howard Hawks 1940)

*Hostel* (Dir. Eli Roth 2005)

*Humanity/ L'Humanité* (Dir. Bruno Dumont 1999)

*Import/ Export* (Dir. Ulrich Seidl 2007)

*In The Realm of the Senses/ Ai no korîda* (Dir. Nagisa Ôshima 1976)

*Irreversible/ Irréversible* (Dir. Gaspar Noé 2002)

*I Stand Alone/ Seul contre tous* (Dir. Gaspar Noé 1998)

*Jaws* (Dir. Steven Spielberg 1975)

*Jeanne Dielman/ Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Dir. Chantal Akerman 1975)

*Junior Size 36/ 36 fillette* (Dir. Catherine Breillat 1988)

*The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne/ Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (Dir. Robert Bresson 1945)

*The Last Woman/ La dernière femme* (Dir. Marco Ferreri 1976)

- Late Spring/ Banshun* (Dir. Yasujirô Ozu 1949)
- Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Dir. Max Ophüls 1948)
- Life of Jesus/ La vie de Jésus* (Dir. Bruno Dumont 1997)
- Lipstick* (Dir. Lamont Johnson 1976)
- Lonesome Cowboys* (Dirs. Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey 1968)
- Loves of a Blonde/ Lásky jedné plavovlásky* (Dir. Milos Forman 1965)
- Man Bites Dog/ C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (Belvaux, Bonzel and Poelvoorde 1992)
- Marathon Man* (Dir. John Schlesinger 1976)
- Melancholia* (Dir. Lars von Trier 2011)
- Michael* (Dir. Markus Schleinzner 2011)
- Michael Kohlhaas – Der Rebell* (Dir. Volker Schlöndorff 1969)
- Money/ L'argent* (Dir. Robert Bresson 1983)
- The Mother and the Whore/ La maman et la putain* (Dir. Jean Eustache 1973)
- My Childhood* (Dir. Bill Douglas 1972)
- My Summer of Love* (Dir. Pawel Pawlikowski 2004)
- Natural Born Killers* (Dir. Oliver Stone 1994)
- A New Life/ La vie nouvelle* (Dir. Phillipe Grandrieux 2002)
- Paisan/ Paisà* (Dir. Roberto Rossellini 1946)
- Perfect Love/ Parfait amour!* (Dir. Catherine Breillat 1996)
- The Piano Teacher / La Pianiste* (Dir. Michael Haneke 2001)
- Possession* (Dir. Zulawski 1981)
- Psycho* (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock 1960)
- Queen Christina* (Dir. Rouben Mamoulian 1933)
- A Real Young Girl/ Une vraie jeune fille* (Dir. Catherine Breillat 1976)

*Rear Window* (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock 1954)

*Red Desert/ Il deserto rosso* (Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni 1964)

*Romance* (Dir. Catherine Breillat 1999)

*The Rules of the Game/ La règle du jeu* (Dir. Jean Renoir 1939)

*Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom/ Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (Dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini 1975)

*Saw* (Dir. James Wan 2004)

*Schindler's List* (Dir. Steven Spielberg 1993)

*Scorchy* (Dir. Howard Avedis 1976)

*The Searchers* (Dir. John Ford 1956)

*See the Sea/ Regarde la mer* (Dir. François Ozon 1997)

*The Seventh Continent/ Der siebente Kontinent* (Dir. Michael Haneke 1989)

*The Shawshank Redemption* (Dir. Frank Darabont 1994)

*Straw Dogs* (Dir. Sam Peckinpah 1971)

*Taxidermia* (Dir. György Pálfi 2006)

*Taxi Driver* (Dir. Martin Scorsese 1976)

*Them/ Ils* (Dirs. David Moreau and Xavier Palut 2006)

*Time of the Wolf/ Le temps du loup* (Dir. Michael Haneke 2003)

*To Our Loves/ A nos amours* (Dir. Maurice Pialat 1983)

*Trouble Every Day* (Dir. Claire Denis 2001)

*Tunnel* (Dir. Thomas Demand 1999)

*Twentynine Palms* (Dir. Bruno Dumont 2003)

*Umberto D* (Dir. Vittorio De Sica 1952)

*Under Capricorn* (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock 1949)

*Vanishing, The/ Spoorloos* (Dir. George Sluizer 1988)

*Weekend* (Dir. Jean-Luc Godard 1967)

*The White Ribbon/ Das weiße Band* (Dir. Michael Haneke 2009)

*Wolf Creek* (Dir. Greg Mclean 2005)

*Yard* (Dir. Thomas Demand 2001)

*Zabriskie Point* (Dir. Michaelangelo Antonioni 1970)